

BUTTERNUT JONES



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BUTTERNUT JONES.

BUTTERNUT JONES

A LAMBKIN OF THE WEST

BY

TILDEN TILFORD



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To

KARL HENRY LOGUE

WHOM I HAVE LONG LOVED, WHOSE NEFARIOUS
SCHEMES HAVE BEGUILED ME INTO MANY EXPLOITS,
FROM TEACHING A SUNDAY-SCHOOL TO CRUIS-
ING AMONG PIRATES, BUT NEVER INTO WRITING
BOOKS, I PRESENT THE GENTLE BUTTERNUT

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CHAPTER I

A PRAIRIE MATINEE

THE Lambkin's cabin stood first on the left of the lane as you went toward the house. It was without architectural ornament, being built on the same simple plan as the cook's and the other cowboys' quarters, but you would know it in a crowd. It may have been the wild-rose vine, climbing the wall by the little east window, or the double row of larkspurs running from the door and airily enclosing a spotless walk, which gave it distinction; it is only known that there was something about Butternut's abode which pleasingly arrested the eye.

The Lambkin! Butternut! Where did he get these? The last he had brought with

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him on the day he anchored at the "Circle-B"; the other had been plastered to him during his first month of service, and though he had early given the lie to its fitness, he was too late, for it had grown to him, and he can never lose it now. It may be that the very paradox helped to keep it in place, such are the surprising ways of the West.

From East Texas he hailed, which is as different as Massachusetts from the cattle country, but having passed his latter years at a Middle State college, you would hardly have gathered that he was from the pine-woods. Tender in years and greener than spring in his new field, he had arrived in quest of a veteran's place and honors. Having worked his way through school, by the same process he proposed to eventually control a ranch or two, and it was this lamb-like confidence, this superb innocence, that first stupefied, then fascinated the foreman into taking him on trial. Within a week it was learned that his extreme fastidiousness came not from weakness, and that his smooth, quiet manners and gentle, elastic speech arose from neither timidity nor the arrogance of conceit.

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At the end of a month, enrolled as a regular, he had, with that ready adaptation which was part of his nature, assumed the cowpuncher's garb, while he talked "hawss" like a native, his speech, rarely faulty as to grammar, beginning to flow in the soft twang of stock-land. But while frequently in jocular mood, and playfully reviling his fellows, never did he lose that veneering of quiet, delicious reserve. His care for appearances was shown in a hundred ways—by the use of his razor thrice a week, as well as the way he groomed his pony, by the cleanliness of his dress, by the polish of his spurs; but had all these things not done so, the fact that he owned a library of twenty volumes would have brought him fame in the land. His "calico" pony was the sleekest of the fold, and though he was never flashy, his neckties were known as far east as the Big Arkansas.

It has been said that his cabin was pleasing to see, but on the occasion now in mind "Scotty" was not out to inspect either the rose-bush or the larkspurs. He was inside the Lambkin's shanty, for the reasons that the night was heavy and the weather was wet, and

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he had been some hours in bed. (As the district physician, living at the Circle-B, Scotty had privileges.) Across the room, by the west window, he had been sleeping until, along toward midnight, the cowboy had calmly driven a legless boot against the wall, over his head. As Scotty sat up with a wrench, a soft metallic drawl came clearly through the gloom, above the riotous swish of the rain:

“ I think there’s somethin’ clawin’ on our door.”

Scotty was about to suggest that by making less noise he could probably assure himself on the point, when the next words reproached him. The Lambkin was feeling along the wall toward the candle on the table among his books, as he said:

“ My apologies to you, sir, but I didn’t want you to take me for an intruder. You might have disfigured me.”

He had lit the candle now, and as he moved his shadow from the door there came a wild scratching on the outer side, followed by a long, low whine of melancholy. At once he went to the door and let a wanderer in

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out of the storm, getting a severe wetting for his pains. For the rain was coming with the wind and sweeping with fury through every crack and crevice. So Butternut, when he turned from the door, was right thoroughly drenched, while "Snuffles" was wetter than the drowned. The cowboy had merely smelt of the storm; the dog had lived in it so many hours.

Butternut, clearing away his books, lifted the animal on to the table, and inspected him with critical eye. He was a coarse breed of Skye terrier, about half grown and most unpromising to look at, but he had the Lambkin's sympathy from the start. His wet hair was blacker than the night out of which he had come, and dripping smooth on his strangled body, shone and glistened in the flare of the candle. At first he appeared embarrassed, but anxious to make friends, and presently he ran snuffling about the table, shivered, and put his icy muzzle in the Lambkin's face. Though the howling wet breath outside was but middling cool, he had dwelt in it long enough to get a chill, and as, unlike Butternut, he could not shed his clothes,

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Scotty took the rag-barrel from its corner, kicked it into staves, and started a blaze for his accommodation. Then he gave him a biscuit, smuggled from the supper-table, and the animal ate handsomely, snuffling his thanks.

"Where do you s'pose he blew from?" questioned the Lambkin, as the wanderer snoozed before the fire, his nose on his paws. Scotty shook his head. He had picked up a broken collar, slipped from the traveler with his entrance, and now flung it on the table, its nickel tag toward the light. "You've been hungerin' for romance, Lambkin; I think you've got it here," he said.

Butternut seized the leather and inspected the tag eagerly. Certain confidences Scotty had enjoyed by reason of a steady and cordial association (he frequently passed the night in the other's shanty, for he loved his conversation and books) told him that the Lambkin, in coming West to be a cowboy, had expected a certain reward in the excitement or romance which he had imagined the new life and scenes would bring. Only yesterday he had confided to Scotty his disappointment in

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this respect. More than once had the doctor surprised in him a maiden-like sentiment, and now as the cowboy scanned the name-plate on the leather, the flush which his companion's words brought suffused him to the eyes.

"Catherine Cloud," he pronounced, with relish. "Another stranger—Miss Catherine, the 'oldest inhabitant' don't know you. The plot deepens."

He hung the leather on the corner of a picture, and, moving to the window, peered out into the howling night. "I trust she's not abroad in this weather; but nothin' can be done till daylight."

However, before returning to bed, he stood a candle at each window.

The next morning they found Snuffles, awake before them, familiarizing himself generally with the "lay" of the cabin. Butternut had laid his boots horizontally on the puncheon floor, and finding the pup up to his middle in one of them, took him gently by the tail. But Snuffles, with a smothered yelp, only explored the deeper into the tunnel, as though bent on finding another outlet. Then Butternut, yanking him out bodily, de-

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livered a terrific shriek and kicked the boot into a remote corner. For Snuffles had been slaying a centiped, and nothing could spread more terror through the Lambkin than one of these numerous-legged reptiles. He accordingly petted and praised the pup, and the two became friends for all time. It was not long afterward that he made Snuffles his adjutant and began taking him out to hunt for lost yearlings.

Meanwhile, never a word from the adjutant's mistress! The Lambkin's inquiries went wide, extending as far north as the Staked Plains and eastward along the rails of the Southern Pacific, but, as he had guessed, the "oldest inhabitant" knew naught of Catherine Cloud or of Snuffles's origin. True, the somnambulistic agent at the railway station, ten miles distant, said that he had either witnessed or dreamed how a small black dog escaped from a baggage-car one rainy night, but there had been no "short" report from the crew confirming this fantasy; and Butternut shrank from connecting a railroad with the affair, suggesting, as it did, that the fair unknown might be dwelling two thou-

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sand miles away. Thus the weeks went by until it seemed doubtful if his romance would ever grow beyond a strip of leather suspended across the corner of a picture.

The adjutant, maturing rapidly, soon grew into a coarse-haired dog of under size, but though of singularly discouraging aspect, was wonderfully keen and appreciative. Butternut, regarding him always with admiration, said it was the stock of his ancestors creeping out. He found many names for the five-eighths of him which was not terrier, favoring of course the nobler breeds, such as St. Bernard, Mastiff, or Great Dane, and adapting these in an amazing way to the particular exploit in mind.

Snuffles developed into a valuable hand among the steers. Not on the grand round-up, where his lack of endurance would have counted him out, but in the every-day gatherings of a few cows and a few yearlings, which came up as incidents. Being clever and quick with his legs, he could dodge in and out among a cluster of steers with a rapidity that was dazzling. He came so near to being everywhere at the same time that it was diffi-

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cult to dispute it, though never a hoof nor horn struck him. They often tickled his ears, or brushed the bristles of his scrubby neck, but he inevitably escaped. Butternut once vowed that he had seen Adjutant Snuffles, while endeavoring to flank a galloping two-year-old, pass under the animal's belly without ruffling a hair, but of that there is a doubt. He was always so fond of the adjutant that it is likely there were times when he overdid his praise.

One noonday they went into the hills back of the ridge field, and from there into the prairie that lay behind the hills. Rumor had reached them that a bunch of a hundred or more wild steers had been seen heading southward by Skull Creek, and it was possible that a few of the Circle-B brand were among them. If so, Butternut, aided by Adjutant Snuffles, would cut them out and change their course toward the uplands.

"Terrapin," the calico pony, moved at a rhythmic gait over the plain, and the dog gamboled gleefully beside him. The Lamb-kin rocked easily in the saddle, and looked with pleased eye at the country round. He

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had seen it all before, but for some reason, on this particularly fine afternoon, it seemed fresh to him, and he rejoiced to be abroad. Occasionally he whistled or sang, or smote his pony in the flank, and once he bent over like a greenbrier and catching the adjutant by the slack of his hide, hoisted him banteringly in the air.

Soon a line of brown knolls ruffled the horizon ahead, and he knew that beyond them lay the creek. The adjacent valley was spotted with many cattle, and the drove he was seeking he hoped to find within a mile or two of the ford. Presently leaving the worn trail, he journeyed diagonally across the plain, Snuffles whisking blithely in advance, and a quarter of a mile in this direction brought them to the top of the last rise before the creek, over which the Lambkin rode briskly, sweeping at a lively lope into the valley.

The level, as he had expected, was dotted with stock of many brands, but to these he gave no attention. His gaze at once skirted the belt of cottonwoods lining the stream to where, in a bend in the timber, were gathered the wickedest collection of "long-orns" he

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had seen in many days. Large, lean, and low-browed, they were the very meanest of all the mean breeds, their brand, the "Cross-S," being long notorious from its association with vicious stock.

Butternut was on the point of reining in his steed when disaster was brought upon him by a song. The musical "kick-rick" of a giant grasshopper, wheeling his sidewise flight, smote the air suddenly, and the bronco, shying in affright, bundled violently to the earth. The Lambkin lay morosely on the ground the next instant, with a helpless leg under him, and knew even before he stirred that he was unable to rise. A grinding pain shooting the length of his body, bade him lie still, and this he did, save his head, which he lifted in time to see the calico pony limping toward the creek and his big sombrero, circling away on edge, settle crown upward a dozen yards from him.

And now began a most untimely business. Scarce a minute had elapsed since the mishap before one of the Cross-S steers espied him, but gave him no particular heed. When next the animal looked, however, Butternut had

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remained so mysteriously still that he ogled his head suspectingly. Finally, a stupid wonder taking hold of the brute, he fixed his wicked gaze on Butternut and held it there. Then another caught his look, and that was two, then another, which made three.

Now every one knows, in the cattle country, that there is something about a strange and silent object on the plain—especially when it is obviously alive—which excites beyond all understanding the average “long-’orn.” If still and sinister enough, such an object can fill him with mingled curiosity and fear, and finally, if he be of a certain vicious species, he becomes enraged from sheer terror, and then he is a bad customer, known not infrequently to challenge tradition and attack men. The Lambkin knew this perfectly, and he knew also that he had left his pistol, in its holster, hanging on a peg at home; and as one after another of the steers looked his way, then eyed him fixedly, then came a step nearer, he began to feel a keen mental discomfort which came not from the suffering in his leg.

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Unable to stir without racking with pain, he had lain motionless, regarding the curious cattle with listless gaze, but the peril of his predicament now flashing upon him, his look became steadfast. By no means, however, was he yet afraid. Too long was he accustomed to having cattle of all ages yield to his hand. But despite this confidence, he was soon employing the tactics of the desperate, which is to laugh. Then he knew he was afraid. He strove to persuade himself that the hovering steers were like so many monkeys trying to appear ferocious. They looked ridiculous, he argued, ogling him in that manner. One giant bull in particular amused him by coming up in advance of his comrades and gazing at him with an expression of profoundest stupidity. He felt like getting up and twisting this fellow's tail. Strange, though, he thought, that none of them could divert their eyes from him, and strange, too, that they should continue to come nearer. The foremost of the brutes were now scarcely twenty yards away, and he saw that instead of terror the frenzy of the baffled was in their gaze. No longer able to deny his peril, he

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began to strike his hands upon the earth and to jabber insanely at the sky. A wild fear went hammering at his breast, bewildering him with a sensation which he hated and battled to keep away. The cattle crowded nearer, swelling in number until all the horizon seemed filled with horns—glistening horns that bristled uglily—horns that were keen and polished and deadly.

Butternut looked into the eyes of the forward steers, and thought the afternoon was stiflingly hot. The sun streamed relentlessly upon his bared head, and as the fever struck him, an awful invisible weight seemed to be crushing him into the sod. With swollen eyes he looked again at the bristling steers, and saw that they had come closer—closer. Not even the ending of the world, he thought, could stop their advance. Raising himself on his shoulder, he swore at them bitterly, finishing with a groan at the twinge of anguish incident to the movement. Then the fever and the pain and the frenzy sent him delirious. The air grew heavy with a strange mist, evolving presently into curtains of gray fog which floated in folds and through which

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everything leaped and fell and floundered drowningly. He was lost in a billowy sea, amid writhing fantastic shapes. Or was it one gigantic dragon, with numberless horns and legs? Before he could decide, the objects dwindled into tiny yellow spots, which were joined by others until there was a great swarm, and at times they went crowding everywhere, rushing and tumbling in tangled ranks and files, then they would all swing into one huge yellow ball which zigzagged demoniacally on his vision and came bowling down upon him alone! His head went low and lay upon the sod. A planet sat on his shoulders, crushing him to the center of the earth.

But Adjutant Snuffles by this time had grown curious. He had gone no farther than the creek, where, halting in the hollow under the cottonwoods, he wondered what was detaining the procession. Having been far in advance at the time of the mishap, the incident had escaped his notice; accordingly, after some moments of patient waiting, he returned to the level and searched the landscape for information. Across the open the

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full significance of Butternut's plight would have been clear to a calm man's eye, but the adjutant's comprehension gathered nothing more than that it was some kind of a game. He accordingly cast about for his part in the play, which was not apparent until his eye fell a second time on the Lambkin's sombrero lying crown up in the open. Then his purpose became clear—he must annihilate this thing. He had despised and hated it ever since Butternut hung it over his eyes and made him wear it twice around the yard, so to destroy it was clearly the only thing to do.

It happened, therefore, that the adjutant, his white teeth gleaming expectantly, dashed across the level and fastening fiercely upon the big hat, began to shake it in the manner of his breed when engaged in a bout with rats. But this was no barn-yard task. The sombrero, of the texture of leather, refused to be demolished, and all the adjutant could do was to swing it viciously about, and bearing it banner-like, run rapidly back and forth. Presently it occurred to him that the campaign might be waged to better advantage on higher ground, and he ran up the hill looking

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west. Along its summit he sped, swinging the banner everywhere, until finally it caught the eye of a sunburnt horseman in leggings who, in the company of a lady, had ridden into view down by the ford.

“Splinter my stirrups!” said this man, as rising on his gaunt legs, he regarded the motions on the hill very curiously. He was Foreman Jimsey of the “Twin Bar,” engaged upon the important mission of escorting a strange and handsome young woman from the railroad station to his headquarters.

Now Jimsey knew the adjutant well, and beholding his singular actions, was disposed to make inquiry. He therefore addressed a few hurried words of apology to the lady, and wheeling eagerly from the trail, approached the top of the knoll at a gentle lope. Soon he was near enough to identify the object in Snuffles’s grasp, and this so deepened his concern that he quickened pace to a swift gallop.

“Curyis—almighty curyis,” said he.

As for the adjutant, his one desire in life being to demolish that which he had so long despised, he was too much engrossed to even see Jimsey as he swung over the hill. Im-

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mediately, however, he paused as the sound of rapid shots smote the slope, and with his forefeet in the pest and the tough brim fast in his teeth, turned to view the valley.

Foreman Jimsey was riding like mad, and firing his big pistol into the Cross-S ranks. So close was he that, bending low to a level with their horns, he could lash the weapon along the face of the front line. They swerved, bellowing, and some, bitten by bullets, flinched, but again he crowded them furiously until the funnels of smoke reached their eyes. They wavered an instant, which gave him the field, and wheeling and stooping in the stirrups, he lifted Butternut by the belt. He rode next in a half-circle, then in a straight line, bearing out and away, and it was then the adjutant howled. As they swept up the slant toward him, he ceased his onslaught on the sombrero, discovering a frantic interest in these new movements.

CHAPTER II

THE LAMBKIN AND THE LADY

THE spectacle of her late escort galloping toward her with a man across his saddle, and a dog and a pony trailing after him was something which the young woman waiting by the ford viewed with round and wondering eyes.

The Lambkin, on a blanket in the shade, was laid close by the creek, and under frequent and copious applications of water was quick to revive. And upon opening rational eyes and observing, instead of a menacing line of horns, a serious-eyed and smartly dressed young woman sitting by him, the effect upon him was battery-like. Here was romance, indeed, beyond his most fantastic imaginings.

Jimsey, with saplings, thongs, and the skill of an Indian, was contriving an "ambulance" a little way up the bank, while the

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three ponies browsed tranquilly in the adjacent bushes. The alert adjutant, having by accident frightened a dozing turtle into the water, was barking importantly at the spot where it had disappeared.

The Lambkin's first move told him that his leg was not for use, but through the resulting pain he gave the girl a weary smile.

"You seem to have the best of me, ma'am."

She made a little commanding gesture.

"You must keep very, very still," she said, and tried to get a stern note in her voice.

"Oh, I wasn't goin' to stampede," he said, assuringly. "At least not without lettin' you know. What's Jimsey makin'?"

"He's fixing a stretcher to get you home."

"Yes! Then while we're waitin', ma'am, if it's all the same to you, I'll introduce myself. My name is Jones—Charley Jones."

He looked at her in such an innocently expectant way that she flushed, hesitated, then said, simply:

"Miss Thurston."

He knew that it was not embarrassment

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that had made her hesitate, for she had the confident bearing of one bred in the cities and accustomed to talking with men.

"You're not long in these parts, Miss Thurston," he drawled, politely.

"I got here only to-day—from Kansas City. Mr. Jimsey met me at the station."

"You visitin' on the Twin Bar?"

He talked well for a cowboy, she thought, and she liked, too, the cleanliness of his polka-dot tie.

"Not socially," she answered. "My uncle, in Missouri, is thinking of buying the place, and sent me down to inspect it." Then, reading the further questioning in his gaze, she went on: "He depends a good deal on me in such matters, spending all of his time in politics, and I really know more than he does about business and values."

The Lambkin suppressed a strong inclination to whistle.

"Well," he said, deliberately, "I hope you'll buy it. How does the country suit you—what you've seen of it?"

"I am much pleased, except that it looks dreadfully lonesome. But I suppose that is

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because one can see so far on the plains. Do you never get tired living here? ”

“ Never. It’s as near the center of the earth as Rome.”

She smiled quizzically.

“ What do you know about Rome? ”

The Lambkin flushed as he said, evenly:

“ Not a great deal, ma’am; but I’ve seen it once on the map; and since they built the pyramids there I’ve tried to keep in touch with the place.”

She fidgeted.

“ You don’t talk like a college-bred man.”

“ I can talk better on a pinch, ma’am.”

He was smiling, and she fidgeted again. This quiet man with a drawl and a broken leg was too much for her.

“ Why do you wish we would buy the Twin Bar? ”

“ Well, I think you’d make a good neighbor, and that we could entertain you. We’ve got some powerfully distinguished folks on our place—Bismarck, Spartacus, and General Custer——”

“ Mercy! Who are they? ”

“ They’re a bear, a bull, and a goat. Bis-

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marck and the General belong to us, but Spartacus, he just comes around and boards occasionally. If you settle here, you'll have to pay 'em a visit. You'll like them amazing, and you'll interest them because—you're a most interestin' young woman."

She looked quickly to see if this was impudence, but his face was all frankness.

"I suppose I ought to thank you," she said; "but why do you think I'm interesting?"

"Well," drawled the Lambkin, "partly because you're a prospective neighbor, and partly because you've lied to me."

She colored violently to the hair, while he went on, serenely:

"You called yourself 'Miss Thurston'!"

"Indeed!"

"You should have said 'Catherine Cloud'!"

She did not know whether to look helpless or defiant.

"Haven't you seen anything round here that belongs to you?" he asked, gently.

"You mean the dog—'Boodler'?"

"We call him 'Snuffles,' ma'am. The

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way you looked at him told me he was an old friend of yours. He's grown considerably, and has lost his collar, but you recognized him. Would you like to take him to-day, ma'am?"

She could not know how much this cost him, he said it so lightly.

Before she could reply, Jimsey, with a knowing smile and the remark, "I notice ye're introduced," had led the calico pony, drawing the ambulance, between them. He had hitched Terrapin to a couple of poles, as to the shafts of a buggy, and stretched a blanket between in a way that made a not uncomfortable conveyance. He now gathered the Lambkin in a roll and placed him gently on the stretcher, then, glancing casually at the sun, turned to the girl with regret in his face.

"I'm sorry I can't finish the journey with you, miss, but it's only an hour's ride, and you can make it easy 'fore sundown. The trail is plain, and I trust you're not afraid to try it alone."

"By no means," she said, quickly. "I only hope you'll get him to a physician as

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soon as it's possible—or to some one who can manage him,” with a vengeful glance at Butternut.

“Jimsey,” he drawled, irrepressibly, “she was afraid I'd jump a tree.”

The foreman led her pony to her and assisted her to mount. “There's only one fork, miss,” he called, as she rode splashing across the ford and ascended the opposite bank, “where you take the south road. Tell the boys they needn't look for me till mornin'.” To the Lambkin, as she disappeared beyond the horizon of the bank, he added, warmly: “There's a monstrous peart gal.”

She had made no move toward taking charge of Snuffles, and as the cowboy was not particular that she should, he had not mentioned the matter again.

Jimsey's praises had only begun. For the first three miles, as he led the injured Butternut on his strange vehicle over the back trail, he talked of nothing save this young lady from Missouri, her mission, and the little of her history that he knew. Whether this was due to a strong friendly interest in her (it could not have been more, for Jimsey was

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already a much involved and thoroughly satisfied husband) or to his simple desire as a loyal neighbor to give Butternut the news, is not known, but it is certain that no topic could have been more to the Lambkin's choice. It may be, too, that the foreman, who felt himself a born match-maker, with that marvelous perception inevitable with the species, had scented in the air certain delightful possibilities. One of his earliest remarks after leaving the ford seems to sustain this view:

"Lambkin, if I was single and know'd as much as you about things besides stock, I ain't so all-fired certain't I wouldn't set up to her!"

Butternut sought to elaborate on this joke.

"You think there'd be a chance, Jimsey?" he said, with innocent earnestness.

Now Jimsey of course knew that this was the young woman whose name Butternut had been putting at the end of a question and whose dog he had been caring for these last three months, and nobody, he thought, could want a better start than that.

"Chaince, Lambkin! Chaince! Why,

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I'm blamed if you ain't got a double-girted cinch and a down-hill pull! And ain't she a lily-queen? Well, I should *jedge*. Ye see, I know'd she was comin' 'cause Boss and her uncle been keepin' the mails hot for two months, and last week come a letter sayin' he was sendin' his secretary and niece, 'Miss Catherine Cloud'—I come nigh jumpin' clean out o' my spurs at the name—to look over the place, with full authority to close, subjeck of course to their lawyers approvin' the papers. Well, of course they was a chainece o' there bein' two ladies o' the same name, so after meetin' her this mornin' I kept sorter quiet till we'd traveled a mile or so, then I said, mighty casual: 'Your dawg's been in this section some time, ain't he?' and you orter seen her face. It lit up like fireworks, and then she told me how the dawg was given her by some friends in Los Angeles she was visitin', how she lost him from the cyars on the way home, and how he must have eat up his tag, for she never got track of him. Then I told her all about you— Your leg hurtin', Butternut?"

The Lambkin had groaned.

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“Jimsey—Jimsey, you didn’t hint that I’d been *lookin’* for her?”

He adroitly reasoned that she would attribute his anxiety not so much to return the dog as to see the owner, which, being true, was something he of course preferred to conceal.

“Lambkin,” said the foreman, in a pained voice, “you mustn’t take me for a centiped. I jest told her you was a gradgit, and that you’d been takin’ monstrous good care o’ her dawg—nothin’ more.”

Butternut could now understand why a sudden playful whim could have caused the girl, knowing him as her dog’s keeper, to withhold her name.

“She’s mighty well fixed,” persisted Jimsey. “Her uncle is a senator or somethin’ or other, and buys ranches for pastime. You better set up to her.”

The Lambkin laughed uncontrollably.

“Jimsey, you’ve done a whole lot for me to-day, but I’m obliged to say you’re a damn fool.”

Nevertheless, he had found something not unpleasant in Jimsey’s remarks, and they set

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him to musing in a sort of whimsical fashion. He believed he had read in the girl's eyes that she was a long way from him, but that did not prevent him from dwelling with relish on the thought that he had passed a half-hour with her in right friendly converse. He began to wish that he had made more of himself at twenty-six than a cowpuncher, and to wonder if in the game of life, so far as he had traveled it, he could not have played to better advantage. His standards had suddenly become what he supposed were the standards of this girl from Missouri, and in the pigeon-holes of his past he went delving for an excuse for his splendorless showing. There came to his mind that period when, by managing the principal's correspondence and wielding a labored nightly pen in the interest of a few country journals, he had made his way to the end of the college term. Colorless days were they sometimes, when his only luxury was butternuts, and that because they made no demand on his purse, his access to the master's store (supplied by a thoughtful gentleman in Ohio) enabling him to keep his pocket and stomach

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filled when other ways were scant. His jocular companions, when they named him, had never suspected that frequently he had nothing more to eat. The way he had surmounted obstacles in the old days showed that he had had ambitions and delusions, but it was certain that these had not troubled him through later years, while his poverty had continued to flourish nobly. And what would *she* say to that? Thus unconsciously and most presumptuously he involved the girl from Missouri in his fancies as he journeyed with a broken leg over the plain.

It was three weeks, despite Scotty's best offices, before the Lambkin left his bed, and six before he again bestrode the calico pony. A lover of books, however, the whole inert period was like a holiday to him, save when Jimsey rode the twenty miles once a week to see him. That gentleman's visits, Scotty gathered early, were as much a source of exasperation as of pleasure to the patient, though the young doctor never stayed to hear some of the matters reported on by the garrulous foreman. At certain points of their talk Scotty would withdraw to water the larkspurs or feed the

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bear Bismarck, and more than once, reentering the room, was he just in time to see the departing Jimsey catch on his elbow a copy of *Vanity Fair*, or an equally heavy volume, intended for his head.

"Captain Kitty," as she was becoming known throughout the section, had bought the Twin Bar, and her uncle was expected down from Missouri in September. She had made no changes on the rolls, and Jimsey thought her the sun, moon, and stars of the range, save on one subject—Butternut. The simple foreman was disappointed at her apparent lack of interest in the cowboy, which he could not understand, and it tried his heart not to be able to say on his weekly visits, "Lambkin, she asked about you." Once only, a month after the incident at the ford, had she mentioned him, and then it was to ask the foreman casually if the cowboy he had taken home that day on a stretcher ever got well. And Jimsey, swearing under his breath, had been tempted to say that he had died, just to see if her face would not show that she had been "puttin' on" a little.

As for the Lambkin, he would have been

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surprised indeed had she sent to the Circle-B any particular inquiries about him. Her maidenly reticence was in perfect accord with his very high opinion of her, and he would have even been disappointed at any expressed interest on her part. It was this keener appreciation which so provoked him with the senseless Jimsey.

CHAPTER III

“GENERAL CUSTER”

“SPARTACUS,” King o’ the Plains, came with a soft roar from the underbrush. His great brindle eyes, gleaming wickedly in the firelight, looked over the shoulder of Butternut, who was nearest. His back, which it took a tall man to see over, hid half the horizon.

“Wow!” cried the Lambkin, with a motion toward his belt. McCormick, the giant, stared helplessly at the stars.

“Don’t ye dare, Lambkin!” he wheezed. “He ain’t *bellered!*” This in a chattering hope.

So they waited, breathless, while the king sized them up. Apparently he thought well of them, for he only roared. Had he belled, it would have been time to clear the vicinity, as in that case they feared every inch of his mountainous body.

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“Wow!” repeated Butternut, in a swift breath. There was silence for a time. McCormick stood, his back to the fire, stretched with the luxurious sense of a man living again, and looked thoughtfully off into the shadows. The tread of the king came faintly in the short mesquit woods.

It was months since the bull had been seen in the neighborhood of the Circle-B, and Talbot, the foreman, and his cowboys, who in other days had been taught to go about with weapons at half-rest and a wary eye on the landscape, had begun to take cheer in the belief that he had made his home on some distant range. To have him turn up, therefore, in this unexpected way was depressing.

Nobody dared to say they owned him, as to do so would immediately bring them to law in response to an endless list of damage claims, while his brands were too obscured by the scars of combats to show where he belonged. Without question, he was the biggest and wickedest bull in the whole brown country. McCormick had on one or two occasions set out to slay him, but unfortu-

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nately in each case had forgotten it. At least it was supposed that was the way of it, for on no account should it be hinted that the giant was not the man to carry out his intentions. Most persons were confused when it came to looking Spartacus in the eye. He was so tough and massive that bullets, even if they pierced his flint hide, might have nothing more than an irritating effect, in which case men were few who would care to be on the same acre of ground with him.

The king's horns alone—monstrous affairs which he wore with pride—were a long history of battles, being cracked and chipped from base to tip, while his great shaggy face, battered and scar-marked, told of a life of wickedness and crime. He fought his way from range to range, and the agitation of a stampede was his delight.

Talbot and four comrades had been for some days on a ride up the divide, and were nearing home with that sense of peace and restfulness natural to men after a season of hard service. They were serenely figuring upon lying around for a spell, allowing themselves to be disturbed only in case of fire or

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flood. But this sudden appearance of Spartacus threw them into a fever. It was surprising, the sense of deep uneasiness which the presence of the bull could put in a man's breast. Not necessary at all that he should be at one's heels. Anywhere in the same general locality was enough.

On this occasion McCormick was most affected. He turned presently, breathing through his teeth, and swung a menacing weapon into view.

“Fellers, if me and that beast ever meet ag'in, it'll be the last time!”

“A remark I've heard once or twice before,” drawled Butternut, between drafts on a pipe, the puffing of which the excitement had caused him to suspend. “It strikes me you've just missed a dazzlin' opportunity.”

The giant growled and kicked a stick into the fire.

“Yeh don't say! He wuzn't comin' fer me, wuz he? I reckon nobody's lookin' to murder him.”

The Lambkin laughed musically.

“Of course not. Nobody wants the advantage of *him*. But, say?”

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"Well, say it." The behest was unanimous.

"I was just thinkin'. S'pose he meets the general?"

The question, carelessly offered, caught them simultaneously, and silence like a blanket enfolded them. For a full minute each was lost in speculation.

General Custer had come to the Circle-B some weeks before, with mud on his short, straight horns and cactus needles in his beard. From somewhere in the sweeps of the plain he had come, sidling, not timidly, but with the arrogance of a person approaching his own house. Though all visible evidence pointed to his being lost, the fact, if he was conscious of it, gave him no concern. He was an exceedingly serious-minded goat, to whom the permanent loss of his bearings was a circumstance too trifling for notice.

The cowboys might have rejoiced more at his arrival had it not been for the ill-mannered way in which he "put up" at the ranch. He did this exactly as if he were boss of the place, ignoring the authority of every one, even to Talbot, who viewed him with a

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stern eye from behind a corner of the stable, but was forced to flee to the hay-loft for safety. Did any one but regard the general evilly, he would divine it on the instant and come for the particular offender with an arrow-like speed and a marvelously accurate aim. As a consequence the cowboys were continually dodging and leaping from his path, until Talbot declared that their agility excelled anything he had seen them previously display, even on the liveliest occasions. For this very prowess, however, at stirring up things, his business-like ways being most diverting, they suffered him to remain, knowing, too, that there could be no particular discomfort in his presence so long as they behaved themselves and allowed him to run the ranch. They began, then, to watch for his approval before venturing on any moves which might be ill-timed, and it often became a matter of rivalry among them as to who could cross the vacant ground between the house and the corrals with the least show of concern, the general standing meanwhile in the open, his gaze directed quizzically toward them, while he chewed placidly a bit of

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broken stirrup-leather or an outcast saddle-girth.

It was this characteristic of the goat—this stubborn idea with which he seemed to have been born, of having absolute right of way over all living objects, regardless of proportions—which brought him now so strikingly to the minds of Talbot and his companions.

Since the hour of his arrival he had conducted himself on this principle, but now from out of the blue North there had come a famed gladiator who, if their paths met and there was any show of officiousness, would demolish him, and the sound of whose voice alone should make him tremble. But therein lay the general's stupidity. He had not the intelligence to tremble at anything, and they knew that he would regard this monarch of the prairies as an insect which a whiff of his breath would cause to fade into the horizon. And when the king should refuse to vanish and ignore his bluster, there would be trouble which, as a matter of course, could only mean the ending of the general. Their anxiety, then, was deep for the "little fellow," whose

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inexhaustible meanness had made them love him. McCormick especially regarded his peril in a serious light—and Spartacus *had* headed toward the ranch.

They struck the trail early next morning, and rode with speed, intending to reach home by noon. The brushwoods stood thinner and thinner as they advanced, dwindling finally to a scattering growth which told them that the prairie was at hand. Toward the end of the morning they emerged upon the broad sweep of rolling plain at the farther edge of which stood the ranch-houses, smaller than blackbirds in the distance.

That Spartacus had gone before was evident, for occasionally in a soft spot of the trail McCormick would pause to direct attention to the marks of the bull's great hoof. Nor was it long before they came up to him. By the roadside, between two knolls, he was browsing leisurely, from time to time taking a step in the direction of the ranch.

McCormick at once called the company to a halt, and said, with earnestness:

“Fellers, this hyer's a serious matter. Somebody must hold him back while some-

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body else goes 'n' gits the general into a safe place."

"Easy enough in part," remarked the gentle Lambkin, with a glance at the king's magnificent horns. "I'll agree to tend to the goat, and"—bending with some impatience toward the giant—"I s'pose you're achin' to do the holdin' back?"

The words stung the giant. He was in the exact mood to take them as a direct affront. He looked savagely at Butternut, and from him to Spartacus, and his mind seemed made up to something. Dismounting, he removed a long lariat of triple strength from his saddle-horn, his fingers working with vicious swiftness. Then he slid his six-shooter into the saddle-bags, and passed the bridle of his mount to the Lambkin, whose word of restraint sank at once in his throat.

"Close up—*you!*" commanded the giant. "I want no interference, and I'll *hev* none." With a gesture of his fist toward the king: "Me and that animal hev been on ill terms for some time, 'n' it behooves us to settle our account squar'. I'll tackle him afoot, 'n' if

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ye watch close, ye'll see him roped 'n' staked with less trouble 'n' a lame colt.”

He was clearly at ill temper, and when the giant reached that state no one was in the habit of venturing advice, especially when, as in this case, his anger overbalanced all judgment. His intention was to lasso the king, drive the picket-pin at the rope's other end into the earth with his heel, and, before the bull could reach him, leap beyond the play of the lariat. Ticklish business, indeed, but that was his plan. His state of mind, too, left him with a reckless desire to make the exploit as hazardous as possible. To show his pretended contempt for the bull, he deliberately walked in a half-circle around him, halting at the top of the slope beyond—a useless maneuver, which left him facing, unmounted and unarmed, the wickedest pair of horns in the Pecos Valley. Spartacus for the moment was tranquil, but the buzzing of a fly was enough to turn the tide of his temper.

The giant arranged the noose, and curved his long body into position for the cast, while his mounted audience gave breathless attention. The next moment the loop went spin-

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ning a graceful flight, and the audience groaned as it saw that he had not calculated sufficiently for the slope of the land. Spartacus, lifting his head at the instant, presented a clear target, but the noose, falling short by a few inches, merely struck him across the nose!

Immediately the king lowered his head, while he roared in sudden anger at the giant, who squared himself for the leap of his life. Another roar, then a bellow, and the cowboy, squatting with his hands on his thighs, awaited the lunge. Could he but dodge the first sweep of the horns there would be a fair chance of his reaching his bronco. But a miraculous interruption spared him the effort.

The king was on the point of charging when his eye caught a new object, and he hesitated. This object was nothing more than a solemn-looking head, with two straight horns and a wagging beard, which bobbed at this juncture over the summit of the knoll.

The general was in a reverie, as usual, and chewed meditatively on a weed, his head cocked sidewise against the breeze. On the brow of the knoll, however, he became

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suddenly aware that the present moment promised something of greater interest than memories of other days. He regarded the delegation before him with a thoughtful and critical eye. He had the important manner of a new overseer. His beard rose and fell reflectively until he was given the expression of a sage.

The audience and McCormick looked at the king. He had paused with the first step of his rush, and was now gazing with curiosity at this venerable citizen who had come so unceremoniously upon his vision. It was not unlikely that he had never seen such a beast before, for in those days goats were few on the Pecos range. Again he started up the slant, and again he came to a halt to look in astonishment at the creature before him. The general, on the summit above, tilted his head at a new angle and looked ever so wise.

Spartacus roared softly, raking the earth with his front hoof and switching his tail, and McCormick suddenly found himself an outside party to an embarrassing piece of business. Some distance away he assumed a respectful attitude, his chin in his hand.

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Spartacus roared again sullenly—perhaps it was the *beard* that puzzled him so—then advanced slowly, bellowing. His head swung lower in the dust, and his great hoof at intervals pawed the trail, lifting the earth in clouds which showered on his back, covering the red and white spots. Whatever this thing—this beast with a beard—he would annihilate it. But now came an amazing performance.

The general stood suddenly on his hind-legs, bleating like a young bully unable longer to restrain himself. Then he waltzed off at an angle, and, doubling sharply from a new quarter, came plump against the big brute's side with the force of a battering-ram. The astounded spectators saw the king stagger and heard his mighty bellow of rage, then the battle was on with a swiftness and fury that took the power of motion from them. A gasp from Talbot, a howl from McCormick, and they were rigid with suspense.

The general assailed his adversary at angles and from all sides. In a manner rapid and dexterous he evaded the rushes of the

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king, who charged repeatedly, bellowing and sweeping up the earth in his frenzy. Each thrust of the bull was calculated to end the business, but the goat seemed always in a safe place.

The general wheeled and dodged in innumerable circles and squares, and, calculating his time to the second, at intervals went in and established his forehead in the enemy's flank. The sound when he did this was like a blow on an empty barrel. And the bull would bellow again furiously, and it would seem that they fought amid smoke, so thick was the dust which rose, fog-like, choking the air until one could but dimly see the combatants and catch faintly the red gleam of the king's eyes. The general was everywhere in the commotion, wheeling and dodging with bewildering speed, and when he periodically landed on his adversary, the rebound was as though he were an object of india-rubber. He feinted and countered and thrust with a skill that was dazzling, and seemed to be following a planned line of battle. There was a veteran's generalship on his side, and lumbering overconfidence on the

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part of the bull, who, finding his great strength of so little importance, grew disturbed in mind and, in consequence, awkward. His lunges were terrific but ill-timed, and the general evaded them in a manner so scientific as to fairly stupefy the wondering audience. Again and again would the king sweep at him, bellowing, only to swing into space and in the same instant feel the weight of his enemy against his ribs. These repeated persistent bumps were as violent as the blows of a sledge. They began to tell upon the king. Their machine-like regularity grew monotonous. The great horns cleaved the air fiercely, but with less precision. Unable to inspire terror in his antagonist, he became so enraged that his rushes came blindly.

As for the general, he gave no sign of weakening. In this tempest of war he was as fresh and unruffled as when enjoying a frolic with the calves at dawn. He now grew zealously aggressive, lest his part in the festivities should lag, preceding each telling blow with a playful bleat of challenge. Spartacus finally grew tired. His body swayed uncertainly through the dust-clouds,

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and several inches of his tongue showed lifelessly. Presently the general seemed to take his resistance as a personal affront, and, doubling into a ball, hurtled himself with the velocity of a thunderbolt against the king's belly. The bellow of the bull was changed to a grunt as this happened, but he whirled heroically in a world of dust which hid for a moment the motions of the conflict. Then out of the tumult there came the sound of a succession of thumps, rapid and regular, and abruptly a pair of immense horns and a massive, dust-coated body emerged into the clear air and swung at a jaded pace over the plain.

The awestricken horsemen of the Circle-B looked after him until the tallest hair of his back had sunk from view behind a knoll and the silence of the prairies enveloped them. As the dust of conflict lifted, the general could be seen inspecting the vegetation along the slope.

“Wow!” said the Lambkin, finally, and there was reverence in his voice.

McCormick passed his hand carefully across his brow, as though brushing cobwebs from his vision. Then he executed a

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strange, wild dance, chanting as he flung his arms abroad:

“ Oh, my queen—my jewel—my primy donner—my Lally Rook! Come—Oh, come to me! ”

But bethinking himself, and lest the general should take him at his word, he gained his bronco with marvelous strides, and mounted with agility and speed.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE ON THE TWIN BAR

OVER on the Twin Bar Jimsey had been foreman long before Little Jimsey began to toddle about and take walks with the brindle calf. That had been but a few weeks ago, and the calf was still very young, uncommonly lively, and with the same passion for cookies that had given him his name. A burnt cookie to his eye was a feast, and a brown one a luxury almost as unsurpassable as twenty minutes of his own mother's milk.

Small Jimsey, by a private arrangement with the kitchen hands, always carried a supply of the dainties in his apron, which induced Cookies to hover so constantly in his neighborhood that, as a matter of course, they were chums. More, they were the idols, the pride, the delight of Captain Kitty.

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It was a pity the calf grew so fast. They had made a pretty pair when of the same height, waddling everywhere in company, though for that matter they were still a team very pleasing to look at. Small Jimsey would go nowhere without Cookies, and the calf was stubbornly of the same mind toward Small Jimsey, so that to see one singly in the open was as rare as an eclipse. Evenings before dusk always found them on review, and, even when Captain Kitty was not around, there was not a cowboy who cared when they got in his way. In making these rounds they had an important air, and were apparently much concerned over the proper performance of every duty. For there was scarcely a spot about the ranch which they did not daily visit. From the cribs to the cowpens, from the woodpile to the stables, they sauntered, pausing at intervals to amuse each other by tumbling—for both were acrobats—these exercises always occurring between cookies. First Small Jimsey would tumble, then the calf, after some preliminary flourishes, would show him how it ought to have been done, then the boy would tumble

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as before, signifying that he thought his way the better, and Cookies would swing his head negatively and again illustrate his idea of the feat. And Captain Kitty, superintending, would scream uncontrollably.

Matters went well until the time came to brand Cookies, when there rose such a howl from Small Jimsey that the irons were never heated. No one could blame him for not wishing to see his chum burned, his blue-and-white side disfigured, though everybody knew what would be the outcome. It was difficult to keep an unbranded calf on the range, especially one of Cookies' breeding. They started to fence him in, but there came another howl. Small Jimsey was most unreasonable. He refused to see any logic in his elders, and was determined that Cookies should have the whole prairie. Captain Kitty finally gave in to him, and that ended it.

The expected happened at the end of just two weeks. Cookies was stolen on a still and moonless night when even the mosquitoes were sleeping. For miles around the cowboys scanned the prairie next morning, but

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'twas no use. The calf was " nabbed " in the manner of other " mavericks," and ere this was doubtless numbered in a passing herd, with the map of five counties burned into his hide.

Had Small Jimsey been Foreman Jimsey, he would have sworn. As it was, he lay on the floor and bawled systematically. They expected he would subside by noon, but after dinner he took a fresh start, and continued a relentless wail the balance of the day. But Jimsey thought it useless to follow the thieves, as from the trail of their herd they were clearly a good number, and he simply had not the men, all but two of his cowboys being away on errands of importance. So the foreman could only shake his head, while Little Jimsey howled afresh and Captain Kitty lifted her hands in despair.

It happened that at this particular woful moment on the Twin Bar, Butternut, returning from a mission twenty miles northward, met a company of sinister horsemen driving a bunch of beeves toward the uplands. Turning aside, he gave them a wide road, and, nodding civilly to the drovers, sent a

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careless eye through the herd. He was on the branded side of the bunch, which had nearly passed him when he observed toward the rear an unmarked blue-brindle calf. But though he had seen this animal several times when passing the Twin Bar, and knew it as the beloved of Little Jimsey as well as a favorite of Captain Kitty's, he rode intently in the opposite direction.

"Six mavericks besides the brindle," he mused. "I guess they'll do some brandin' to-night. Things must be in a stew at Jimsey's—Terrapin, we'll have to take the back trail."

This was toward the end of the afternoon, and the Lambkin, turning and keeping just out of sight, followed the thieves until they camped for the night, just across Devil's River. His own blanket he spread in a hollow of the hills, about half a mile from the stream.

A long, steep ridge stretched on his left and right, limiting narrowly his view of the stars, and between these hills, blown softly up the hollow as he slept, came an odor which aroused him. It was a trifling thing, this

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scent, but coming as it did from scorching hair, it threw the Lambkin very wide-awake. They had begun operations sooner than he had calculated.

To Butternut at once was suggested a pretty, if perilous, game. Without further reflection, he took a hitch in his belt, and, feeling over the ground, gripped the ivory handle of a large revolver. A moment afterward, with the noiseless stride of a specter Indian, he was moving down the hollow toward the river, his stooping figure scarcely visible in the light of the stars.

Suddenly an abrupt turning of the parallel ridges brought into his view the yellow glow of a camp-fire. Thinner than cobwebs was this light, and but for the time of night it might have been taken for the first gray of the dawn by eyes less keen than the cowboy's. In the pale haze he outlined the branches of a bush, which reminded him that the river flowed between. He grumbled a little here. Though the night was warm, the prospects of a swim did not strike him as pleasant.

He kept on until presently his head and shoulders bulged from a fringe of chaparral

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over the river, whence he peered into the shadows of the farther shore. Across the stream, and a little to his left, the smoldering fire still glowed, and now he could occasionally hear the piteous bawl of a brute in distress. That they were branding was certain, and he wondered if Cookies had yet been to the ropes. He grinned grimly at the thought, and thrust his head farther over the river in his effort to pierce the gloom. Nothing of definite shape could he see. The night hovered heavily about his shoulders, and everything seemed a shadow. The farthest bank was so black and fantom-like that it might have been some long, dark monster in wait.

The river he knew was there from the gurgle of its current and the scent of moisture spreading upward. He was convinced that a gathering of horses, cattle, and thieves were encamped on the opposite bank, and that few, if any, were asleep. Now and then he glimpsed a dusky figure, pausing an instant in the dull ember-light.

He resolved to move toward the glow. Accordingly, he drew off his boots and hung

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his sombrero and belt, with the ivory-handled weapon, in the fork of a bush. Prowling for some moments along the verge of the bank, he finally found a descent gradual enough to admit of his reaching the water without the noise of a plunge. Even then he slid guardedly, plowing deep furrows in the clay with his cautious heels. Within another moment he was at the river's edge, and settling dexterously to his neck in the water, balanced against the current.

As he struggled forward the glow from the dim fire deepened to a hue so brilliant that he no longer closed his eyes experimentally to see if he might lose it. It was an assured reality.

Carefully, slowly, he swam onward, planting his strokes deep that there might come no sound save the ripple of the surface eddying and swirling past his ears. But the novelty of the proceeding and the impressive quiet of it all presently took somber hold upon Butternut. Out of so much silence and darkness grew the thought that his hazardous errand was one of benevolence, and he wondered if he were not having more trouble

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and running longer chances than the object of his mission was worth. He felt for the first time a menacing presence in the darkness. Along the horizon of his fancy peril was pointing his way.

"All for the kid," he mumbled as he swam on. "And Captain Kitty," he came near adding, in spite of himself.

Soon he had crossed the stream and began to nose along the bottom of the bank. His movements here were not unlike those of a foxhound mousing along a hedge fence. Presently he stopped, lifted himself clear of the current, and began to cautiously ascend the slant. The gravelly clay loosened in places and rattled down into the water, and at such times he would pause to see if the noise had caused a stir above him.

Upward another yard he climbed. The camp-fire shone brighter. With each lifting of his body his view became clearer, while more distinct were the signs of industry on the plain. Listening now, he could readily hear men talking. They spoke at intervals, and their voices were coarse and low and deep. Butternut found a certain cheer

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in their talk, though it was the speech of foes.

“All for the kid,” he mumbled again. “And—” He added it this time.

His forehead and eyes now rose above the brow of the bank, and he looked between a cactus and a bush. The scene was about as he had imagined. The light was thrown dimly where he lay, but was brighter farther on where the fire was flickering smartly. The embers were being stirred.

The Lambkin peered eagerly about in the task of making out objects. There were four men around the fire, and he thought he saw another in the shadow beyond. Over to his left a few large bodies were arched irregularly against the clouds. It was the beginning of the herd. Then nearer he descried another bulky figure, not so large, which he found it impossible to name. It lay partially between him and the fire. Butternut craned his neck forward in the effort to determine the nature of this object. Suddenly he saw it move. A portion of it turned until against the firelight he glimpsed a profile with which he was familiar. Cookies was con-

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tentedly chewing a weed, and a grateful feeling took hold of the cowboy as he realized there was time.

Meanwhile the men had finished with their last "subject," and were about ready for another. The branding-rods were at proper heat, and the person who was to wield them was getting impatient.

"For Captain Kitty," growled Butternut, viciously, as he swung half of his body over on the level. Cookies was hardly three feet away! As the Lambkin stretched forth an arm, on the very eve of victory, an appalling doubt crossed his mind. He must catch a leg—indeed, by no mischance must he miss a leg! Then came an instantaneous maneuver, and the commotion began. A quick lunge and a fierce clutch, then a rapid scramble backward. He had seized Cookies by a hind-leg and drawn him sliding to the verge, where a second wrench sent them plunging over the bank together. So powerful was the swing that in their downward flight they scarcely struck the slant, but dropped at once into the river, where, like a boulder, they went to the bottom. Cookies was half-stran-

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gled when they rose, but the Lambkin had closed his mouth, and now swam for both, keeping one arm under the floundering calf's neck and thus holding his nose above water until time to put it under again.

And that time arrived quickly, when four furious men with blazing torches came rushing along the high bank. Butternut at once pulled Cookies under and dived diagonally with the current. Rising for breath, he found they were drifting close in by the opposite shore, beyond the flare of the torches. Cookies was half strangled again, which left him a cumbersome burden, so laboriously they kept afloat. But the Lambkin smiled a wide smile, for his mission was as good as a success, though there were yet times when they were obliged to duck under, as when one of the flaming brands was thrown out over the water.

The cowboy heard the men wrangling, and caught some of their talk between dives.

"Thunder," said one.

"Did ye see it?" asked another.

"Sh'd say I did!"

"What wuz it?"

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"The ca'af stumbled."

"Stumbled hell! He wuz *shoved!*"

Then came the *sput-t, sput-t* of bullets striking harmlessly in the dark.

There were a number of good reasons why the Lambkin should make easy escape. The thieves were little inclined to swim the river for a brindle calf, and to saddle horse and cross at the shallow ford, far up the stream, would take a good half-hour. Besides, this prowler might be one of a number, and they could not *all* forsake the herd. Thus Butter-nut, returning with some difficulty to his boots and belt, moved in peace through the darkness with Cookies in charge, and joined the calico pony in the hollow.

By noon the next day he had reached the Twin Bar, with Cookies at the end of his lariat. Jimsey, putting some shingles on the bunk-house, sighted him a quarter of a mile away, and descended to the yard in a fit. Captain Kitty and Mrs. Jimsey, hearing the foreman shout, hurried to the gate, with Little Jimsey, frantic with delight, at their skirts.

"Well, well," drawled the Lambkin, as

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he swung from the stirrups, "you all don't seem to have been expectin' me. Jimsey, you got some dry hose and—other things?"

He blushed violently, having forgotten Captain Kitty for the moment, or rather had forgotten all save her presence.

An hour later, serene in dry linen, he was at dinner with them, and then in his modest way he told of the rescue of Cookies. Captain Kitty saw that he was shunning all details involving the slightest self-credit, and when he had finished and asked politely if her uncle would not be down next month, she thrilled him unutterably by saying, with simple candor:

"You are the bravest man I ever saw."

So, it had been worth the risk after all! He was glad he looked a better figure to-day than he had with his leg in a sling ten weeks ago. His face went crimson with his happiness, but he said, depreciatingly:

"You mustn't think that, ma'am. It was nothing, I'm sure. Anybody—Jimsey here would have done the same thing."

"I don't believe it!" She whirled vehemently on the unexpectant foreman.

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“ Jimsey, tell me the truth. Would you have done it? ”

And Jimsey, cornered, let his fork fall clattering, wiped his mouth with vigor, and, while he colored to the ears, said, tartly:

“ Madam, I’m a married man, and can’t afford to play the fool—I *wouldn’t*. ”

So she turned a triumphant eye on the Lambkin, but still he was swift.

“ Pshaw, ma’am, you ought to’ve been over on Broken Arrow once to’ve seen some-thin’ brave. ” And he told of a deed he had there witnessed in a way which took his own exploits for a time from her mind.

Dinner over, with his hat in hand, and Terrapin saddled and waiting, he bade her good-by.

“ When you comin’ over to see the nobility, ma’am? ”

“ I can’t say—until my neighbors call on me. ”

Then it came to him that he had committed another breach by forgetting the custom of polite countries, but he said, evenly, as if he had foreseen her reply:

“ Judge Waskom, who owns our place,

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has been away with Mrs. Waskom for two months." And he added, innocently: "Won't you consider this a call?"

"Of course not," she answered, smiling, "since Cookies had to bring you."

Accordingly, he rode away, happy because he knew that she drew no fine distinctions between himself and a man who owned a ranch. .

CHAPTER V

THE RIVER ROAD

IT was by Sentinel Mountain, where the old Laramie Trail is joined by the road from Piney Basin, that the Lambkin, quite by accident, next met the girl from Missouri, their united ways winding for a stretch of five miles along the Pecos.

A land of lizards and cacti is the country here, save in the flats or valleys where the cattle range. Barren and bold and desolate are the plains everywhere, the eye reveling in distances gray and appalling. Westward, a spidery blue, the chains of New Mexico elbow the horizon, and it is along this five-mile stretch that you can see Saddle Mountain, beyond the Rio Grande. The red river, gleaming in the sun, glides slow between precipitous bluffs so tall that to follow the stream you ride high until the valleys are remote and the scattered herds are like sheep in the lowlands.

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The Lambkin, traveling leisurely, was watching a languid hawk wheel his graceful flight against the profound blue of the sky, when the girl from Missouri rode into the trail behind him. She was on a pacing bay pony, and her posture was that of an accomplished rider. He lifted his hat, with the bow of a cavalier, as he greeted her.

"Aren't you pretty far from home, miss?"

She was alongside him now, and the calico pony received a significant pressure from the Lambkin's heel which told him to keep abreast.

"Not a great ways," she said, smiling; "I am used to riding long distances," and Butternut, viewing her so unexpectedly, felt his heart quicken at her unquestionable loveliness. To his poetic nature she seemed the featured embodiment of an unfeatured ideal around which, all his manhood years, he had woyen the hopes whose realization belongs not to the fortunes of men.

"I can tell that, ma'am, from the show-in' you make in the saddle. I'll bet you own a hawss or two in Mizoura."

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"Oh, yes. My uncle always keeps a few pacers in his stables for my particular use. Is Boodler with you to-day?"

"Yes'm. He's just beyond the rise yonder. He likes to scout ahead for Indians. You out seein' the country?"

"Yes. I make a little circuit about every day, and hunt for 'view'-points. I'm beginning to like it."

He made no effort to hide his smile of gratification.

"I knew you would. It's a little lonesome here at first, but after a while you find plenty o' company. All these mountains are friends o' mine, and those farthest away are the best. That pale fellow yonder, southward, shaped like a tommyhawk—he's clear over in Mexico, but he knows me just the same."

"How delightful!"

"That's a citizen o' Texas," he went on, pointing toward a lone peak on their left. "We call him 'The Parson,' he's so solemn. Looks like an old settler, don't he? You can't help wonderin' how long he's been there, and if he's *never* smiled."

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She had followed his speech and his gestures with a childish rapture. Here was entertainment unknown in Missouri.

"You certainly know how to make them interesting," she said. Then they rode for a short time in silence, while below them, over two hundred feet, flowed the broad, orange-colored river. Eastward a white procession of indolent clouds curled leisurely, like revolving fantoms.

"You won't find many 'views' better than this. See that kangaroo!"

He pointed to a huge jack-rabbit bounding his diagonal flight along the face of the slope on their right, and she sent a quick eye in that direction.

"Gracious, what a whopper!" she gasped. "His ears are as long as his legs, aren't they?"

"Yes'm—almost. He'd make an elegant eavesdropper."

Starting at their very feet, the wonderful leaps of the animal seemed to have already carried him, a gleaming streak, a mile toward the valley.

"He must 'a' forgot somethin'," whim-

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sically mused the Lambkin, "or is goin' for the doctor. Or do you guess he's just on a hurried visit to those cattle?"

"Cattle—where?"

"Down there—in the valley."

She gazed intently, leaning in the saddle.

"Are *those* cattle? They look like the animals of a child's Noah's Ark."

"They're over two miles away," he said.

He showed her Painted Mountain now, and the Twin Peaks of the Purple Range, and Juno's Cañon, and the Blackfoot Hills by Devil's River. He told her a legend or two in connection with these places, and he told them with strange and thrilling power. The languid hawk above them circled lower, as if to hear his wondrous tales.

After a time he reminded her of their first meeting by asking, innocently:

"Why didn't you want to give me your name, Miss *Thurston*?"

He was entirely unprepared for the challenging reply, as she turned a mischievous eye upon him:

"Why didn't you give me yours, Mr. *Butternut Jones*?" and he was cornered.

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"Jimsey is quite a linguist, isn't he?" was all he could say.

"He talks pretty freely of you, I'll admit. He told me how they would never have known your name but for the way your sweetheart addressed her letters."

"Sweetheart!" he laughed, with keen relish. "That's real fine o' Jimsey. I'm a great lover, Miss Cloud, but all my sweethearts are out here in my cabin. Lorna Doone is one, and Becky Sharp another."

Jimsey having also told her of his twenty books, this was no parable to her.

"That's Crockett's Cañon across the valley yonder," he now said, and told her another legend.

"Davy Crockett's most famous bear-fight happened in there. The cañon's not half a mile long, as you can see, but there's only one way to get in, and even a bear would need wings to get out, 'cept at that one openin'. Crockett was pilotin' some rich fellows on a huntin' trip, and he had dropped behind when the balance o' the party ran no less than five bears into that trap. As it was almost night, they decided to camp at the

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mouth o' the gulch and pick off their quarry at their leisure the next mornin'. Then they fixed up a game on Crockett. After he'd arrived and they'd had supper, they got to banterin' each other on their courage, and finally one offered to bet a hundred dollars that there wasn't a man in the company who would go alone to the end of the cañon. Crockett knew there was bear in the gorge from the way the dogs acted, but he stretched himself and said that although he was feelin' a little tired, he guessed he'd take the bet. Well, he went through without a scratch, and he sent the skins o' the five bears to General Houston."

She had listened like one enthralled, and again she thought there was nothing like this in Missouri. After a while their road led them by the very edge of the river bluff, and the cañon was so narrow here that it seemed they might almost leap across it.

"Would you like to see a rattler, Miss Cloud?" he drawled, presently.

She gave a little shriek, as if the reptile had suddenly appeared in the road.

"There's quite a robust specimen over

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there, sunnin' himself." He pointed across the river to the opposite bluff, where on a sloping flat rock lay the reptile in question. She shuddered.

"The horrible, creepy, slimy things! I'm glad he's across the river."

"Oh, he has plenty o' friends on this side, only they don't happen to be on parade. You don't seem to have a passion for them?"

"I hate them—*hate* them."

"Then maybe you'd like to try a shot at him?"

She drew rein abruptly, and so did he.

"I don't believe I'd dare," she said, with pretty hesitation. "I never shot a pistol."

The Lambkin became most persuasive as he drew forth his ivory-handled Colt.

"Of course you'll dare," he said, and his voice was smoother than rivers. "You don't have to dismount. That hawss you're on is about as 'fraid o' firearms as he is of oats. It's the simplest thing in the world, and I'd shorely like to see you wing him."

He of course knew that she would be lucky if she hit the side of the bluff, but his face betokened every confidence in her skill.

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So she, thinking perhaps what an exploit this would be to mention in her letters home, yielded finally, taking the weapon in both hands. As he adjusted it in her grasp, his hand upon her fingers, he thrilled a little, and it was not for the fate of the rattler. As she lifted the pistol he backed away cautiously, for he saw from her marvelous aim that this was ticklish business. Adjutant Snuffles, poking his head suddenly from behind a boulder, was signaled to stay out of danger. The circling hawk wheeled nearer as if to view this performance.

“Higher—higher, ma’am!” he called. “You’re shootin’ at the river! And *don’t* close both eyes!”

“I *wasn’t*—you know I wasn’t!” she cried, viciously; to take him seriously affording her a pretext for delay. Then at once she fired courageously, and with frightened gaze looked for the result. There was no perceptible movement of the rattler save a drowsy lifting of his head in gentle inquiry at the noise.

“Once more!” laughed the Lambkin, and she fired again and even a third time

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with the same effect. Then she quit in disgust.

"You'll have to do it for me," she said, and the Lambkin trailed a deadly eye down the barrel. At that distance, being a fair shot, he could pepper all around the target, and perhaps once in six times was due to hit the rattler plumb; but, by a rare stroke of fortune, the lucky shot was first. An instant the reptile seemed pinned to the cliff, then, writhing and rolling down the slanting rock, toppled into the river. Now shall we forgive the Lambkin?

"The original serpentine dance," he laughed. "A little practise makes it easy." And he pocketed the weapon as coolly as if there could have been no other result. "There's your dawg, ma'am."

The adjutant had come forward to see whether or not they had been shooting at a bear. Her face shone at sight of him, but he gave her little notice.

"I think he should be yours," she said. "Jimsey tells me that he saved your life, so you must love him. Will you accept him from me?"

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The Lambkin flushed with happiness as he bowed.

"You are more than kind. I *am* a little attached to him."

And somehow this offering and acceptance of a gift seemed to have opened the way to closer conversation. She had read just eighteen of his twenty books, so their field of discussion was without limits, and thus was their way a lane of delight. But all lanes, however pleasant, must end, and the ending of this came when the forks of the trail, two miles after they had left the river, divided them. In order to make her "circuit" she must take the right-hand road, while his business lay eastward.

"We've had nearly seven miles o' conversation, ma'am. But they're the shortest miles I ever rode."

Her only answer was a smile, but deep in her unwilling heart, as she left him, lay the hope that she might, on another day, ride the River Road again with this man.

CHAPTER VI

CAPTAIN KITTY MAKES A CALL

AFTER the gathering and despatching of the first train of beeves to market, for the Circle-B cowboys who had not gone with the shipment there were a few dull days—so eventless, in fact, that when Talbot, at twilight, rode in from the Twin Bar and had his coffee with the superior and mysterious air of a man who carries news, there was among his comrades much private jubilation. They had begun to grow feverish, and although in the flare of the supper lamp their faces loomed pious as a Sunday dawn, that anticipation ran high was evident, below the table, from the way they handled their heels.

“Boys,” said the foreman, at last, with a grin at McCormick, “Captain Kitty and Jimsey air comin’ to see us to-morrow, but that ain’t the best. That yearlin’ o’ Jimsey’s

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that they call 'Eureka'—the white fellow with a yaller tail—I've bought him, and he's comin' too."

McCormick fidgeted, and began spinning his pepper-box nervously. It was his third year at the Circle-B. From the Pan Handle he had wafted down one fall, when men were scarce for the round-up, and Talbot, influenced by his tale of hardship, humorously told, had promptly given him a place. He was a guileless, colossal youth of singularly diverting ways, but his superstition especially had long been a standing joke.

"A white yearlin' with a yaller tail," he had often affirmed, "is the twin brother o' calamity. I never yet see one o' that complexion without witnessin' some sort o' rippin' catastrophee the same day. Sometimes it's a cyclone, sometimes a flood, and again maybe it's just nothin' more'n a peaceable death in the fambly; but, in one shape or 'nother, she always comes."

And though it occurred to none of his hearers to take this notion seriously, certain it was that there lived in the giant's memory a catalogue of instances which, if his word

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was to be used courteously, supported the virtue of his claims.

“Why, I mind,” he had said, in the days when sniffing doubt in the air, “Old Pilligan’s pet, for instance. Pilligan’s ranch sets up nigh the head o’ the Washita, and he once owned a ca’af that was a clean white all but the tail, and that was a punkin yaller. ‘Salt-peter,’ Pilligan called him, and he was his pride. Well, I ain’t ever forgittin’ the day Salty was a year old. Somebody had hinted to Pilligan about them same marks on a yearlin’ bein’ sure signs o’ death and the like, but he had merely looked at ’em in a pityin’ sort o’ way, and ’lowed he hadn’t been born the previous spring. Well, on the very night the critter come of age, as it were, Old Pilligan was a-wishin’ he hadn’t been born at all. It rained a deluge the whole black night, and the river—sufferin’ kittens! The river at daylight had riz’ to fifty times her natural size, a-rippin’ and a-rollin’ with a roar like a billion stampedes. The whole valley was a-flood, and the water in the yard went into our bootlegs. We built a raft to git out to the corrals, and then had to go powerful

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cautious and stay in the backwater, clear o' the current. I never see such a wet landscape. Most everything in a quarter of a mile o' the river was drowned, and the corrals—great hawss-flies! The corrals was all located by the bank, the one we branded in bein' in two sections, the lower half reachin' clear down to the river, and it happened that the evenin' before we had shoved no less than a hundred beeves into the lower section. Well! Of that whole assortment o' choice beef never a hoof nor horn was in sight, and about the cheerfulest spectacle we see was a bunch o' ca'aves standin' belly-deep in the upper section, a-shiverin' and a-bawlin' away in a most distressin' fashion. But what set Old Pilligan wild was a sight back o' the stables, on the high ground, where, above all that flood and havoc and ruin, there humped in the drizzlin' wet a half-drowned yearlin'—white all but the yaller tail—a-bleatin' and a-bellerin' away like a whole orchestra. Pilligan saw him, and just let out one screech that went high over the roar of the flood, and proceeded with shut jaws to the house. And I never see a man lookin' so wild-eyed as when he come

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out and, restin' his rifle across his thumb, paid his final respects to Saltpeter. But kittens! That ain't a circumstance to the time——”

Here, as a further clincher, he would fall into another corroborative reminiscence.

Now, on the present occasion, his singular weakness came near to developing a quarrel. He felt called upon to deny at too great length the wisdom of the foreman. He declared repeatedly that if Eureka ever cast his shadow on the ranch it would mean disaster of some kind, and implored Talbot either to change his mind or prepare for the worst. Calamity and destruction were journeying to the Circle-B as surely as the foreman knew his brand. Then Talbot lost patience.

“You drivelin' cow,” said he, quietly, but with a vicious twist of his mustache. “You are makin' this matter tiresome. The yearlin' is comin' here to-morrow.”

It can not be said how the talk would have ended had not Talbot, Junior—three years old—now waddled into the room, to be seized instantly by the elder Talbot and placed

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astride his leg for the customary gallop. The youngster was learning the saddle early.

McCormick, to everybody's amazement, seemed on the point of tears. None of his associates had ever credited him with particularly tender feelings. He rose, mumbling, and went out into the starlight of the porch. It was plain that the remark of the foreman had gone deep with him. His bunking quarters adjoined Butternut's, and the Lambkin heard him mumbling on far into the night.

Out by the stables, the next morning, the giant was still grumbling away. Sitting astride a singletree, he pained Scotty and the Lambkin with a repetition of the Pilligan episode, throwing in an occasional allusion to the fact that Talbot had likened him to a "drivelin' cow." He felt that nothing on this day save a full-grown calamity could restore his standing with the foreman, and as at intervals he stared in a helpless way at the landscape, the gentle Butternut grew almost to hoping for the necessary disaster.

It was high noon when Eureka was seen to come over the bellying line of plain which

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marked the horizon in the direction of the Twin Bar. It developed at once that Jimsey had certain opinions which were not wholly at variance with the giant's, for he had provided the yearling with a double and mounted escort, neither of whom, it was plain, had any respect for the business in hand. They were addressing the profanity of two hemispheres at their charge, who, at the far end of a long lariat, did his ablest to merit their remarks. His behavior was marvelous chiefly from his way of proceeding in a number of directions at the same time. His head had pointed north when he was first observed—when in a kind of rotary flourish he had waltzed over the ridge the length of his rope in advance of his captors—but now, in the same instant, it seemed, he had got round under the neck of one of the broncos, and while holding that animal at a standstill, discovered a powerful interest in the view which this new position commanded. Next, by a series of deft twists at the rope, he wove as in a net a leg of the nearest cowboy, whose dexterity barely saved him the pinch. By a skilful and quick swing the rider succeeded

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in unwinding himself, accompanying the achievement with vigorous language, while he regarded the captive with great disfavor.

It required no second glance to reveal that Eureka was a rough customer, and that whenever he chanced to steer in the proper course it was merely a gross oversight on his part. At rare periods he would show a disposition to elope with the whole business, leading his escort a merry gallop for perhaps fifty yards, but far more frequently was he of a mind to stop and argue the matter. Thus the triangular procession approached the ranch in a series of spasms.

Now the farther wall of the creek gorge, toward which the visitors were advancing, rose nearly sixty feet above the bed of the stream, and the nearer bank, scarcely half so high, left open to the view of the ranchmen of the Circle-B a smooth, steep surface, down which, following a diagonal ledge, ran a bridle-path. The main wagon-road, cut through the bank on either side, was spacious and safe to travel, but they knew, from Eureka's present conduct, that he would prefer the narrower and perilous route, and accord-

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ingly watched with keen interest his approach. It was at this moment, as a fitting figure to the entertainment, that McCormick, on the far side of the gulch, stalked up from the road into the open and began shaking his fist at the approaching delegation. Talbot, from the porch, chuckled at this sight. By a motion toward the yard-gate the foreman indicated that the yearling was to be received in the "best room," and as Butternut swung the gate open, Eureka and his escort reached the point where the wagon-road began its descent. Here, as had been expected, the yearling came to a deliberate and firm halt, looking with disdain down through the cut. Surely, thought he, there was a more intricate or difficult crossing. This was too infantile a process.

While he debated movement, the sound of hoofs approaching at a smart canter was heard in the lane, and Captain Kitty and Jimsey rode into view, having come round by the River Road. They drew rein instantly and became amused spectators of the performance on the other side of the gulch. The Captain, as they beheld her, waving her hand

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toward the ambitious and accomplished Eureka, seemed to be introducing that frisky animal to the Circle-B.

Eureka gave a sudden vicious twist of his horns and circled clear of the road. His captor—he of the lariat—swearing mightily, gave him such a wrench as to lift his temper above the point of indulgence. He hurtled sharp about, and there was havoc in his eye. The cowboy shouted, but his leap was slow, and the blunt horns of Eureka met the bronco square in the flank. A shrill, frightened whinny, a lunge, a stream of wonderful oaths from the cowboy as the lariat spun from his grasp, and the yearling was free to call the whole prairie his own. Both horsemen wheeling in pursuit, he made for the bridle-path, speeding head down from the summit, and at this instant Talbot gave tongue as a dying man. His comrades felt no call to wonder, no impulse to wheel at his groan, overcome as they were by the same appalling fear. How on earth the youngster had wandered into the gulch, scaled the crossing-log by the ford and explored the opposite steep with no guiding hold on his collar, was a matter for

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subsequent amazement; but certain it was that Talbot, Junior, had risen into view on the ledge, directly in the path of Eureka! Had the giant's catastrophe come to hand?

But now another cry from the foreman drew attention to McCormick, who was speeding with great leaps along the summit, his eyes sweeping the cañon wall. Within a fraction of a minute he had gained a point whence, by sliding thirty feet to the ledge, he could intercept the yearling, and that, his comrades saw at once, was his design. They knew, too, that in addition to the danger of the exploit, the giant held in his bosom a terror unknown to them, born of an awe long inspired by a certain combination of white and yellow. To him it was likely Eureka came as a four-legged demon of infinite fury, and thus was heightened greatly in their minds the quality of his courage. While the velocity with which he would strike the ledge might pitch him headlong into the gulch, the possibility, if it occurred to him, in no way affected his conduct. With a shout to the youngster below, he slipped over the verge, his heels em-

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bedded in the earth, and the next instant was sailing down the slant.

And here occurred the miracle. Eureka, of course, was coming at high speed in a direction which would cause him to intersect the giant's line of flight, but would it be before or after McCormick reached the ledge? The miracle was that they arrived at the same moment, the giant's heels, dexterously poised, landing plump into Eureka's round side with the force of a catapult. The sound of the blow must have traveled a quarter of a mile down the cañon, and its natural effect was to send Eureka keeling over and over into the gorge, while McCormick sprawled on the ledge—with Talbot, Junior, unscathed, not a dozen yards away!

The crisis had taken scarcely half a minute, during which time the spectators had stood bereft of all power of action. As they now sought hurriedly to cross the cañon, Talbot especially proceeding with amazing strides, McCormick sat up on the ledge and peered with a confused and humorous grin over the edge. The shock of the collision must have been terrific, but apparently he felt

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no discomfort. For he met them, still grinning, at the far end of the crossing-log, and with the younger Talbot safely in charge.

And Eureka? He met them, too, but meekly, switching his tail in mild surprise. The onslaught he had suffered having come as a broadside and sent him rolling, instead of pitching him on his head, had had no worse effect than to knock all contrariness out of him. McCormick, however, stubbornly refused to make him his friend, although the giant was for some reason in most jovial humor. Butternut judged this reason was that he had "proved his case," and could look all men in the eye, though he magnanimously evaded the foreman's glance.

But Talbot's behavior was exquisite. After ascending the bank and greeting Jimsey and his companion cordially, he took the Twin Bar foreman aside for a brief conference, the outcome of which was that Eureka was obliged to return to his former home that very afternoon. Then, gracefully, and in a way most profuse, he apologized to McCormick.

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Captain Kitty dismounted, and, after complimenting the giant in a manner that reduced him at once to a state of sottish beatification, she came toward Butternut with a challenging air. The Lambkin for the time seemed as unmoved as the hitch-rack against which he was leaning like a resting Apollo. Could he be posing? She was angry at once with herself for the slanderous thought, for whatever she must think of him, she must acknowledge him perfectly natural in all he said and did.

"You seem to have missed your opportunity, sir," she smiled.

"For what, ma'am?"

"To be a hero, sir!"

"Oh, that! Well, I don't make a good central figure. McCormick looks better."

"He is taller," she said, with an approving eye on the giant.

"I'm considerably younger. Maybe I'll grow," remarked the Lambkin, who could afford to smile, for he had the perfect proportions which belonged not to the giant. "I'm afraid, though, I'm not lookin' for chances in the hero line. I like to make a

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sort of picture out o' the world, and used to put myself in the middle, till I found I could get a better effect by droppin' back to a corner and just watchin'."

"The world is not a picture to *me*," she said, a little acidly. "It is very real."

"And you are in the middle of it?" queried Butternut.

"Yes. Where would your picture be if I were in a corner? Would you have us all go into the corners?"

"Yes—if we would see. And," he added, gently, his face a safe and open confession, for her gaze was stranded on the horizon, "perhaps other eyes will set us in the middle."

"I don't see how accusing a woman of vanity can excuse a man for being without ambition," she flashed.

But here McCormick, from the stables, called that all hands were needed in the corral, and Butternut hurried off, while Jimsey, who was hanging near, gave a chuckle which made Catherine turn around.

"O Jimsey! What have you done with the horses?"

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He gave a nod to where they were safely tied.

"'Lowed you'd want to walk up to the house, miss."

They were passing Butternut's cabin, which came first in the lane, when Catherine discovered that she had lost her whip. It was too pretty and expensive a trifle to be left behind. Jimsey, turning back, had an idea.

"Wait in thar," he said, pointing to the open cabin door, "and take that big chair you see. Better rest yourself, or you'll be feelin' your nerves purty soon."

Catherine really had begun to "feel her nerves" as a result of the yearling escapade, and the chair invited her with big comfortable arms. She put her faith in Jimsey, while he marched off not more delighted than amazed by his diplomacy.

"I reckon she'll see he's a gradgit now," he said to himself.

Catherine sat down in the big chair with a little quivering sigh of comfort, gave a glance about, and rose instantly. She never seemed to belong inside of four walls, and

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now she stood sniffing about like a deer in a forest. There were pictures on the walls—only etchings and photographs from paintings to be sure, but all from the work of masters old and new, and on one side there was a shelf which held a row of books. A cover, whose soft colors would have pleased a woman, lay over the couch, which in any other cabin would have been a bunk. The puncheon floor was spotless, the two windows gleamed, and through one of them she could see the graceful tendrils of a wild-rose vine.

“This,” said Catherine, determined to deceive herself and dispute the subtle, indefinable proof of ownership which some individuals impart to all their belongings, “is the doctor’s—Scotty’s cabin. I never dreamed he was such an old maid.”

She returned to the row of books, and suddenly began to count. Nineteen! Her glance fell on the table under the shelf where a volume of Milton’s shorter poems and sonnets lay. It looked very old and was much scribbled. *Twenty!* She turned to fly, but there was the cowboy in the door. He had

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not been needed in the corral. His puzzled, astonished face called back Catherine's humor, and she sat down in the chair, laughing merrily, at which he, never dispossessed of his easy air, took a seat in the doorway, an action which was a tacit admission that he expected talk instead of flight, for he was never slow to take what the gods offered.

"Jimsey is looking for my whip. He asked me to wait here. Won't you introduce me to your sweethearts?"

"They'll turn out old friends, I guess," he said, invitingly.

She took up the small volume on the table, and he rose and crossed to her.

"Yes, that's a favorite; but I didn't make those notes. It belonged to an uncle of mine who was a professor at Princeton."

She was brazenly turning to the fly-leaf to read the name when he said, gently: "It isn't Jones," and he wondered, as she dropped the book quickly, if any girl's blush could be sweeter.

"Why are you a cowboy?" she asked, with a nonchalance intended to conceal her impudence, for she was fishing for history.

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"Because I like it. It beats professor-ing."

"You were going to be a professor?"

"I don't know. Anyway I was scared off when I saw it was such hard work."

"But this is harder."

"This! This is not work at all! What! To ride with the wind, to be up and out with the sun, to know midnight as well as noon, to feel Nature with you every minute, whether she's patting you or slapping you—it's the finest play a fellow can have!"

She noticed that he sometimes, without effort, added his "g's" and left his speech without a flaw.

"When you could be a scholar and a gentleman?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Of course you're a gentleman, but——"

"All right, and as for the scholar, I might have kept it up in spite of the hard work and nothin' to eat if I hadn't begun to lose my sweethearts. Many books are like some women. When you know too much about 'em, they're not worth knowin'."

His tone was divided between banter and

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bitterness, and, not knowing which to reply to, she said nothing.

"My uncle could pick his bard like a crow, feather by feather," he added, taking up the book she had dropped. "He could count the bones, could tell where the sinews ran, the sockets fitted, and the flesh padded in properly—but he had lost his Milton."

"You've no new books. I will send you some," said Catherine, who had been scanning the shelf that she might better ignore the return of Jimsey, who had lounged up to the door, diplomatically unremindful of the whip.

"Please don't," he replied, with unexpected emphasis. "I want none that doesn't fit with these, and I'll not live long enough to find out about new ones. It took a good many years to get these sifted out."

"Balzac is ancient enough, isn't he? I've a beautiful set, and you've very few novels."

"I'm afraid I don't care about him if he's the one I know. When my uncle died, a box of his books came to my mother, and I had my pick of 'em. There was a bundle tied in

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heavy paper, and he had written on the outside, 'Who would know human nature, look within.' Well, I've got a proper curiosity to know somethin' of my own species, so I dove in and found a lot o' stuff that made me wish I was an honest, respectable bear like Bismarck, or a plain-faced, out-speakin' goat like General Custer. Don't you think it's better to forget the way we've come in the gladness of goin' on?"

"But Balzac goes with Shakespeare!" she insisted.

"Maybe. I didn't stay with him long enough to find out his company. But Shakespeare don't ever leave the God quite out. You begin to be afraid you're wallowin', and all at once comes a life-line that jerks you up a million miles toward the heights. I never found any life-lines in Balzac. I gave the books to a poor woman who couldn't read, and she cut out the pages and chinked the cracks of her cabin with 'em. Made it quite snug for the winter."

"Well, I haven't read him anyway," said Catherine, at which naive confession Butternut gave a clear laugh and drew closer.

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"I knew you hadn't—I knew you *couldn't*," he said, then at the soft, hurried glance she gave him he was obliged to catch his breath.

"I'm such a stupid," she said, and waited to be contradicted.

"So am I. Don't be worried about that. We've been told, you know, that it's a long way from the head of the tallest man to the stars, and it's such a big stretch from the mind of the wisest man to the mind that made him that it seems hardly worth while to make a start; and I know some men who can't read—in a book—that I've got a good deal of respect for."

Catherine's eye here fell on a little leather-bound copy of Keats which drew her admiration.

"What a sweet volume!" she exclaimed.

"That was my mother's," he said, softly.

Her hand dropped, and she could have savagely punished her fingers for not knowing sacred things. Did not its perfect cleanliness and gently worn edges proclaim, "Who touches me loves me"?

"I should be glad to see it in your hands,"

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he said, picking up the little book and offering it to her.

"Won't you tell me about her?" asked Catherine, not nonchalantly to veil her impudence, but with earnest eyes looking into his.

"She was from Pennsylvania," he said, in a tone that seemed to caress the bare statement. "One of her brothers came West to get rich, and she came along to look after him. Then she found my father, and seemed to think he needed more lookin' after than the brother. Anyway she married him, though her brother loaded his gun and said no man west of the Mississippi could take her out of his house. But my father was a native Texan and had been through a good deal. His father had slept on the prairie with Sam Houston when they were prospectin' for Mexicans and Indians, and was a member of the Harrisburg Congress durin' the Republic. Well, the brother drew his gun, but he wasn't used to real killin', and my father calculated his nerve wouldn't hold out, so he walked right in, knocked the gun from his hand, and carried my mother out

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before his eyes. According to my mother, my father was one of the bravest men that ever lived, but I judge her opinion would have to be well salted to get at the strict facts——”

Her restless eye had sighted a strip of leather dangling from the corner of a picture, and she drew nearer for a better view, but he was instantly before her, yet without the appearance of haste. An exaggerated delicacy made him feel that the undue prominence of the article might tell too potent a tale, and his face held the shadow of a blush as he said, with a gesture toward the painting:

“A very fine effect—at a distance. You lose the perspective by coming close.”

But neither his artfulness nor his sudden color escaped her, and she felt a genuine relish at this key-note to the highest of natures. Another man would have made much of rather than conceal such an opening.

“A charming study indeed! I think——”

“General Custer, ma’am. He knows I’ve got company.”

Her reply had changed to a scream as a

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sudden noise at the window drew attention to the whiskered visage of the general who, having elevated his forefeet to the ledge, was blinking in at her with great vigor.

Another interruption at this moment was the abrupt arrival of Mrs. Talbot, who, after greeting the visitors amiably, said she hoped Catherine had recovered her nerves. The good lady then divided her time between complimenting the young woman from Twin Bar and pouring a vicious stream of epithets and abuse on the head of "that terrible Eureka."

"I jest know I'd 'a' died if I'd seen it. Who you goin' to try him on next, Miss Kitty?"

"Why, I don't know," said Catherine, mischievously. "We'll have to consult Mr. Jones."

"Aw, any man with lots o' children'll buy him," said the Lambkin, soberly. "He'd make an elegant merry-go-round."

This gentle sally threw Mrs. Talbot at once into a fit of giggles. She had often vowed that Butternut would be the death of her. Catherine, too, was laughing heartily

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as they left the cabin, and when, at a point half-way to the house, she was suddenly confronted by a full-grown bear, vigorously pursued by Scotty with a broom, and found her heart in her throat for the third time within an hour, she began to feel that this was the liveliest if not the most delightful ranch of her acquaintance.

CHAPTER VII

KING O' THE PLAINS

SPARTACUS, King of the Plains, was visiting at the Twin Bar. For some days he had been hanging around Captain Kitty's corrals, running things in his usual way, which is to say with a high hand. Even his Sunday behavior was never mild, but the very splendor of his appearance protected him, his magnificent figure entailing an admiration which disarmed all hostility. In size and strength, as well as the majesty of his horns, his equal was not to be found on the Pecos range, and he seemed to understand that these attractions shielded him from the ill-usage to which any common bull of such a nature would have been subjected. Thus privileged, he flourished as a despot, General Custer, so far as anybody knew, being the only creature that had ever refused to be awed by his presence.

Wherever it pleased him Spartacus

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roamed at will, no kind of fencing being an obstacle. If it chanced to be of rails, as was sometimes the case in the timbered country, he would simply brush it aside with his beautiful and capable horns. But his method of surmounting barbed wire was most charming. He would deliberately plant his forehead against a supporter, push two or three spans to the ground, then pick his way carefully over the barbs. The first time Jimsey observed this performance he laughed a boisterous laugh; the second time he took a large chew of tobacco and swore.

Captain Kitty was out by the well-curb, with Little Jimsey, when she saw an object which at first glance looked something like the side of a house stepping toward her across the open. Grabbing Little Jimsey in her arms, she fled to the piazza, where, shrinking in a heap, she could only gasp:

"Mercy, what a beast!"

Then Jimsey did a brutal thing. He came and sat on the steps by her, and laughed long and heartlessly.

"Don't be skeer'd, Miss Kitty," he finally assured her. "It's only one o' them freaks

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from the Circle-B. They've got a regular menagerie over there."

"Circle-B? Isn't that the ranch we visited—where Butternut lives?"

She blushed in a way that delighted Jimsey, for she always stumbled over the name.

"Yes'm."

"Oh, then that's Spartacus!" There was much relief in her voice.

The acute Jimsey noticed that to know the animal as an acquaintance of Butternut's seemed to make her fear him less, and thought to himself that things were coming along. He also decided to take advantage of the moment.

"Yes'm, that's Spartacus. The king o' these diggin's, miss. You wouldn't think an animal o' that size could be licked by a measly goat, would you?"

"A goat? Ridiculous!"

"Of course, miss. That's what I tell 'em. They've got out a wild tale about that ornery old goat, General Custer, meetin' Spartacus on the prairie and buttin' him around like a basket, and finally makin' him run like a coyote. But they can tell that to the Indians.

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Why, Miss Kitty, it'd take the slam-bangin'-est fighter on four legs to lick him. He's the boss o' the range, and though he's meaner than sin, I love him like a brother. Ever I tell you what he did for Butternut and me?"

Captain Kitty shook her head and looked interested.

"It was last spring, durin' the freshets. You see, it don't rain *often* here, but sometimes it rains *enough* in one day to last a couple o' years if you could only sprinkle it out, and this was one o' them times. Abe Toliver, who owned a place on Skull Creek, about fifty miles west o' here, was sellin' out, and hearin' he had some bargains in 'short-horns,' I 'lowed I'd amble over there and strike a trade. Well, just as I was leavin', along come Butternut Jones, sent by his foreman on the same errand, and so we went together as far as Alkali Creek, where the high water sent us home. But, you see, the creek wasn't high when we struck it—in fact, it was drier'n a horn, and right there's where we got in a mess. It was nigh dark when we ungirthed, and leavin' our ponies on the main bank and takin' our saddles and blan-

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kets, we camped for the night in a shanty that stood on a knob in the middle of the creek bed—so much lower than the main banks as to be well sheltered from the winds, yet so high as to seem safe enough from a chaine rise.

“We slept heavy, and what awoke me was a dream of stampedin’ cattle. They seemed a long way off, but there was a million of ’em, and all of ’em bellerin’ and the earth shakin’ as they come. I set up with a jerk, listened a minute, and guessed what had happened. Butternut was still asleep, so I hit him a lively clip—he couldn’t have heard me holler—which brought him to, and together we went to the door of the shanty.

“It was daylight, there was little wind, and the sun was comin’ up serene and clear, as if it had never rained a lick. And it really *hadn’t* been such a soaker right around us. But in the up-country it must have rained furies, for it had sent a flood down on us the like o’ which I’ve never seen. You ought to’ve seen that creek—it was *drowned*. There wasn’t any creek left. What we saw in place of it was a roarin’ river with two branches,

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divergin' above and joinin' below our cabin, leavin' a torrent about fifteen yards wide and nigh as deep between us and the ponies. The water had jumped up more'n twenty feet in the night and made our knob an island, and she was still climbin' at an amazin' rate. A little more rise and we would be yanked into the current. The flood was already 'in a foot of the door, and a few inches more and our shanty would be caught in the torrent and join the procession of brush and drift-wood that tore past us from the uplands.

"But the worst noise wasn't nigh us. Down the cañon we could hear a tremendous roarin' where the ravine, turnin' sharp, caused the torrent to sorter rise on its hind-legs and batter itself into a lather before passin' round the bend. And this was what made our position particular embarrassin', for to be caught up by the tide and hustled like a chunk o' timber through the elbow was a dubious entertainment.

"And there was no way out of it that we could see. Swimmin' across the fifteen yards against such a current was plum out o' the question, though there might have been a

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chance of it but for the shape o' the main bank. She sloped only at a point just opposite us, where the wagon-road had been chiseled through to a slant. From the ford to the bend below she was steep and smooth like a cliff, and there was no catchin' hold, so we would have had to swim in a straight line, and that wasn't to be thought of. The torrent would sweep us down and send us churnin' through the elbow before we could take three strokes.

"Well, there wasn't anything to do but wait, and let me tell you that waitin' to be drowned on an empty stomach ain't any picnic pastime. There was a slim chance that the flood might not rise high enough to catch us, and that was the only hope we had. But she kept comin' up, inch by inch, until there was scarcely standin' room outside the cabin. Opposite us, just over the top of the bank, we could see the wet heads of our ponies, and that's the first time I ever wished I was a hawss.

"I was powerful excited, but Butternut was cool as a sandwich, as he always is. He's the hardest man to flurry I ever see. 'Jim-

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sey,' says he, ' if the ponies were a little closer we could make it,' but I didn't catch his idee till a minute afterward he dived into the shanty and come out with a long snake lariat that he'd got from his saddle. Then, as he began to loop and coil for a throw, I looked again at the bank and saw another head—big as a barrel, with two tremendous horns—on the horizon, a little to the south of our ponies, and the next minute old Spartacus ambled casually up to where the road sloped down through the cut. He was out early to inspect the damage by the rain, I guess. Any other time he'd a tried to start a row with the ponies, but I reckon the noise o' the river attracted him; anyhow he come slow and solemn as a church down the slant, and stood close by the howlin' water. The flood was now 'in three inches of our boots.

"Well, Spartacus hadn't fairly begun to take in the scene before Butternut leaped past the end o' the cabin to get swingin' room. I hardly believed he could make it at that distance, but, as I said, there was little wind. Spartacus hadn't moved after comin' to a halt, and was lookin' straight at us, when

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Butternut circled the noose wide and clean, and sent it swishing out across the water, till, risin' and fallin' in a fine curve, it settled hoop-like over the bull's horns and was drawn tight and safe. Nothin' was ever neater.

"Well, he started inland at once, and we both grabbed the lariat just as he wheeled and got his big back under the rope. In another minute we was pulled down, flounderin' in the water and hangin' on as if we had hold of a cable to a tug-boat. Lucky the lariat was new and strong, or it would have been broken by his first ugly rush. But he had to slacken speed. Even his strength couldn't pull against such a current faster than a walk, and I don't believe we could have kept our hold if he hadn't slowed up. Of course he was b'ilin' mad, but he had to move as slow as if hitched to a plow.

"The water tore over and past us with such fury that we seemed to be movin' at fearful speed. Sometimes we was pulled up as if on a crest, long enough to get breath, then the action o' the current sent us wallowin' below the surface till we thought we

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must drown, then up again we were hauled. Once a mass of brush struck us with nigh fatal effect. It didn't check the bull's stride, but it nearly broke my grip for a second. Suddenly it went down under us, liftin' us half out o' the water, then as it was sucked from beneath our legs we were plunged under again. Anything like a log or slab would have done for us, but the bigger driftwood was tearin' down the main stream.

"I was just thinkin' my strength couldn't last, and that I'd have to turn loose, when we struck bottom, and went completely out o' the water, with our shoulders on the slope. And let me tell you, Miss Kitty, we didn't have a minute to spare. By the time we walked up the slant and come round to the edge o' the high bank, the flood had swallowed our island, and we saw the shanty picked up like a chip and churned to splinters in the elbow. We lost a couple of powerful good saddles, but it didn't worry us."

The foreman paused, looked with furtive eye at Captain Kitty, saw that she was listening intently, and resumed:

"But that Butternut Jones! Miss Kitty,

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you certainly spoke the truth when you said he was the bravest fellow you ever saw. Do you know what he said to me when he had that bull by the horns? He tried to make me take the lariat alone, sayin', 'Jimsey, you're a married man, and she may not hold us both; you can throw one of the pony ropes to me.' And he said it just as cool and calm as if he was offerin' me a cigarette. But I know'd the man that stayed would be drowned before another rope could git to him, though it was only when Spartacus was well started and he saw that I just *wouldn't* go alone that he give in. He's the bravest man that ever buckled a girth, Miss Kitty."

Like a strategic general the astute Jimsey had withheld his climax till the last, and while he was not sure that it had had a broadside effect, he was confident it had sunk in.

Captain Kitty had listened breathlessly to this wonderful tale, which, while most convincingly told, was something she was inclined to discredit. But whether true or not, it had been highly entertaining. She had really been thrilled somewhere in the

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narrative, but at what particular point can not be told.

It is known, however, that when she retired to slumber that evening it was to see in a wild dream a far-off mountain turn to a great bull, and a man on a calico pony ride up its side, and on up one of the mighty horns, at the tip of which he vanished.

CHAPTER VIII

TREACHEROUS MOONLIGHT

IT seemed but a day or two since Bismarck was a cub, a frisky, innocent young thing, brought to the Circle-B in a blanket by the gentle Butternut. How on earth the animal got that name can no more be told than where the Lambkin got *him*, and on that point Butternut himself is the most bewildered.

Somewhere in Clover Gulch, he said, he was riding leisurely when there came the noise of a sudden scuffling above him, and from out of the brush and rocks, square on to his saddle-pack, bounced a fuzzy round object, which he held toward the moon and discovered to be a very young bear. The onslaught, it was evident, was wholly involuntary and without malice, for it was followed by no offering of violence, the one desire of the animal being at the moment to

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simply obtain grip enough with his small claws to hold on while the bronco jolted him ranchward.

This had happened more than a year ago, and meanwhile Bismarck had grown amazingly. His air of authority, too, had increased with his bulk until it was plain that, next to General Custer, he regarded himself as owner of the ranch and everything on it, though this conceit was forgiven as readily as were his comical manners. It was amusing to watch him stalk importantly about the yards, sometimes alone with his dignity, sometimes jawing with the general, and laughable to see his clumsy body double into a circle when he endeavored to sit like a gentleman. Being as peaceable as any kitten, he was at liberty to go wherever his fancy might lead, though it was firmly believed that he accepted the privilege as a matter of course. Anyhow, he became a great gadabout, spending most of his time gossiping with the inhabitants of the barn-yard and corrals. Having known no home save these places, every beast and fowl was his friend, and even the blackbirds learned to alight and scamper on his back

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with the same good-fellowship they showed old Samson, the level-horned bull.

But Butternut was most privileged, and therefore happiest of them all, which was his right. For was he not Bismarck's first and only master? When the cub had fallen out of the clouds into a strange country, had he not been the first to offer him a home? These things entitled him to a certain royal intimacy with the animal, which he was careful to show on all occasions. With a familiarity calculated to consume his comrades with envy, he would haul the bear about by the ears, or gleefully roll with him among the corn-shucks.

In a general rough-and-tumble they were about evenly matched. There was a time, in the days of Bismarck's early growth, when he appeared rather helpless in these combats, but now it was different. Butternut found one day that it kept him quite busy to hold his own in a tussle, and accustomed so long to ready victory, took a keen pleasure in the change. His first downfall so surprised him that he ungenerously started to box his adversary's ears, but after a second and

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third defeat he straightway apologized. The Lambkin never attached a liberal value to an opponent until his worth was fully proved, when he stood at once ready to take off his hat and honor him accordingly.

Now Bismarck was so fond of the Lambkin that he wanted to follow him everywhere, and one afternoon, when Butternut was preparing to ride over to the post-office, he came down by the gate and spoke in growls of the pleasure it would give him to make the journey too. But this was ridiculous, as the distance, counting both ways, was a dozen miles, and the Lambkin expected to cover it in a hurry. Bismarck, however, was determined, and rubbed himself insistently against the legs of both the Lambkin and his pony, which caused Terrapin, who was docile only when not surprised, to suddenly and vigorously lift his rear hoofs. Butternut was standing directly behind him, but fortunately so close that the animal's heels were against his breast before they shot outward, otherwise the result might have been serious. As it happened, he was simply raised clear of the earth, and, after traveling backward five

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paces, landed on a barrel, which, rolling, broke the force of his fall. The incident, however, was quite enough to arouse the wrath of the mildest man, and it left the Lambkin furious. Terrapin he could not blame, so directed all his anger toward the bear.

“ You howlin’ fool! For two shucks I’d break you in two! ”

Bismarck, drooping his head, whined many regrets, but the Lambkin, with no gentle hands, seized him and hauled him toward the creek, whose high and steep bank stood back of the cow-pens. The animal howled bitterly, and sought with craft to get a hold on his master’s clothing, but Butternut dexterously kept the length of his arm between them. A series of vicious tugs brought them to the verge of the bank, and the next moment Bismarck, by a deft movement of the Lambkin’s foot, was sent whirling over and over down the incline. Growling and howling, and clawing up the dust, he tumbled and slid until finally, clearing the slant for several feet, he swooped into the pool below. There, as he splashed about, his growl be-

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came more like a roar, which caused the Lambkin to laugh in wicked glee, even as he rubbed his chest.

It would take some minutes for Bismarck to reach the ford crossing and return to high ground, and it was not at all likely that he was now in the mood for travel. Meanwhile Butternut, whose journey lay in another direction, could be well on his way, and accordingly, with a satisfied smirk over his exploit, the Lambkin strode to his bronco, and swinging airily into the stirrups, rode at a lively pace down the wagon-lane. And as he rode, the way he had routed Bismarck struck him as highly humorous.

"Now, didn't he do it handsomely!" he chuckled. "And wasn't it a circus to see him slide!" Then he added, doubtfully: "He'll want to lick me, tho', when I get back."

Which wasn't a bad surmise. For Bismarck, while his disposition had been friendly from birth, was keenly sensitive when it came to gross injury, and such direct and violent abuse he would not be likely to overlook. The chances were excellent that he

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would take a few rounds out of the Lambkin on the latter's return.

Butternut observed that the afternoon was gliding into evening, which pleased him, for night traveling was always a joy to his poetic soul. He loved to ride at twilight through the treeless, tranquil hills, fencing pastures among the stars, or garnering messages of mystery from the morose whisperings of the night. As a result of the mood which now enveloped him his hurry was forgotten, and soon he was riding at a walk by the pastures and fields.

And when he met Jimsey, a little later, at Panther Ford, he was quite disposed to pass a quarter of an hour in valueless converse. The Twin Bar lay some miles west of the Circle-B, and Jimsey was homeward bound. His greeting was most hilarious, and the Lambkin was glad to his heels. For some reason of late he was always happy to see Jimsey. They talked at some length. They inquired the health of everybody in their respective localities, alluded with fine irony to the judgment displayed by a mutual friend in a recent "hawss" trade, mentioned the com-

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ing dance on Green Fork, and, in short, found so many topics to discuss that it was heavy dusk ere they separated.

The Lambkin, as they rode apart, called back, as an after-thought: "By the way, Jimsey, that pesky bear o' mine may be followin' me, and in case you meet him, just rope him and lead him home as a favor."

Jimsey, laughing noisily, assented, and Butternut rode onward, musing lightly on the probability of his attending the Green Fork dance.

His way, from Panther Ford, was a gravelly road, winding with the stream down the gorge, along which stood the only timber within many miles. The moon, which had been in view long before dusk, slanting through the cottonwoods, cast luminous "crazy" patches athwart the gulch.

The Lambkin could never say where he first became aware that Bismarck was following him, but believed it to be at a point about a mile from the ford. At first he strove not to credit his sight, thinking, in view of Jimsey's compact, that the moonlight was deceiving him. Then he sought to build the

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object into some other animal, but it was too round and thick for dog or wolf. Jimsey, then, had let him slip by.

For a moment the Lambkin's chagrin was about to swell into an outburst, but softened instead into supreme disgust. As the bear neared him he pulled rein, and turning, with his thigh across the saddle, addressed him reproachfully and with weariness:

"Biz, I'm ashamed o' you. Do you know you're wearin' my patience plum to frazzles?"

Bismarck had halted for an instant, then continued his approach, and now stood motionless, his eyes glittering warily. The Lambkin began to lecture him:

"You're an idiot, that's what you are, sir—the biggest idiot in this township. You're the foolishhest 'critter' that ever wore hair."

Bismarck whined a protest.

The Lambkin, naturally, each moment that he scolded felt himself the more deeply injured, and finally could not resist the impulse to dismount and approach his auditor threateningly. Bismarck at once rose on his haunches and began moving his forepaws up

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and down in the manner of a boxer on the defensive.

The Lambkin advanced upon him and gave him a brisk rap on the ear.

"Go home, you mule-headed baboon! D'you hear? *Git!*"

But Bismarck showed no inclination to retreat. On the contrary, he seemed the more determined to hold his ground. He whined again, and then suddenly roared mightily, assuming a most ferocious aspect. But the Lambkin was used to that. It was a favorite trick of the bear's, when losing the advantage in a scuffle, to try to frighten his adversary with the noise of his voice and the sudden taking on of a savage look. But this had grown so old to Butternut that it made him laugh to have it tried on him now. By way of humoring Biz, however, in order the greater to ruffle him finally, the Lambkin dodged and ducked away as though in terror. The next moment he had stridden up to Bismarck and tormentingly struck the big black nose with his knuckles. The animal uttered another roar, which filled Butternut with delight, and lunged his heavy body at the cow-

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boy, who sprang out of his way and, twisting his foot under the legs of the bear, flung him upon his side. The Lambkin's favorite trick was quite as old as Bismarck's, but in this case a very pretty success. However, Bismarck, after rolling ingloriously, was at once on his feet, and came at him so fiercely that Butternut for a moment feared he was in earnest, but immediately the Lambkin was laughing and dancing nimbly about, alert for the opening of which he had availed himself before. It came presently, and again making a quick and deft thrust with his foot, he twirled Bismarck upon his back.

"You won't go, hey? You web-footed, thumb-bitin' woodchuck! Then I'll have to *take* you."

The Lambkin usually enjoyed nothing so much as a frolic with Biz, but just now his hurry came on him again, and, thoroughly provoked, he resolved to escort the animal home and lock him in the stable. But before doing this he would have one more "go" with him, and this time (with a grim desire to show the bear that he was master at any style of encounter) they would wrestle it out

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at close quarters. However, in this bout he must secure "the under-holt." It would never do for Bismarck to get him round the waist. Accordingly, as the animal now rushed, he squared off with alert eye, determined to seize the right moment for closing in.

But, balancing forward, he stopped abruptly, his face pallid as the moonlight. Bismarck was coming for him; but, ignoring an instant the ways of the battle, his gaze went beyond, where up the gorge came Jimsey in brisk pursuit of a massive black object whose lumbering, awkward gait awoke memories in the Lambkin's mind.

With a wild, terrified yell he sprang aside, escaping by an inch the lunge of his antagonist, who, apparently alarmed by the approaching hoofs, did not wheel, but scurried away down the gulch. A moment afterward the animal in advance of Jimsey was rubbing his thick body cat-like against the Lambkin's legs, and Jimsey, halted near, was saying, apologetically:

"Couldn't rope him no more'n I could rope a coyote. Ever' time I'd throw he'd

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squat flatter'n a skillet. Met him less'n half a mile t'other side the ford, 'n' been tryin' to head him off— What's ailin' you, Butternut? ”

The Lambkin seemed bereft of speech. He had been seized by a faintness in every limb, and would have sunk at once to the ground had not Bismarck propped his broad back against him.

“ Jimsey,” he mumbled, finally, “ is your gun handy? ”

“ You bet she air.” The foreman's six-shooter glistened in the moonlight.

“ Well, if you don't mind, Jimsey, I wish you'd turn her on me and let her go. It'll be a clean waste o' lead, I know, but I really ought not to live.” There was a prayer in the Lambkin's voice.

“ What ye done, Butternut? ”

“ Done! Jimsey, Jimsey, what *haven't* I done? Before you came in sight I was overtaken by a bear! ”

“ Lambkin, Lambkin! That wasn't a *b'ar* you was frolickin' with? ”

“ Yes, Jimsey, a bear of full size. I—I thought it was Biz! ”

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" Oh, you—*Lambkin!* "

" And I boxed his ears with my hands and gave him a couple o' clips on the nose! "

" You buzzard! "

" I was just goin' to *wrestle* him, Jimsey, when you interrupted the game. I was just lookin' for the *under-holt!* And when he got savage, I thought he was just bluffin', and—Jimsey, Jimsey! " The Lambkin fanned the air with his hands. " Either shoot quick or turn me into a corn-field and let me lose myself! "

He was really in a bad state, the enormity of the blunder affecting him far more deeply than the conscious facing of any danger could have done. His legs wobbled from partial paralysis, and his teeth clicked vibrantly in the night. Finally he succeeded in shambling over to his pony, waiting patiently by the roadside, and clambered laboredly into the saddle.

Jimsey, whose laughter was like nothing if not like the screeches of a panther, headed the procession homeward, Bismarck trailing behind the Lambkin, whose journey for the mail was obliged to await another day.

CHAPTER IX

THE GREEN FORK DANCE

EARLY September.

The first dance of the season was to occur at Colonel Jake Baldwin's ranch, near the head of the stream known as Green Fork, and in the moonlit dusk of the important evening wagon-loads of families and bunches of horsemen were moving from every quarter over the plain toward a common center, as to a magnet. As these converging cavalcades approached the blinking windows of the ranch-house, the night was filled with the noise of mirth. The occupants of the vehicles conversed in glee on every conceivable topic, or screamed in feigned terror as they passed a hazardous unevenness in the trail, while the jocund cowboys rode riotously, with many a gibe and jest between the merry gleams of cigarettes.

Through the purple evening, from the trees which lined the stream, came the clan-

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gorous song of the insects, and perfumed peace filled the land.

Colonel Baldwin had himself gone carefully about his house and yards, casting a sagacious eye into every corner to see that no preparations were lacking for the comfort and convenience of his prospective guests. For the jaded ponies soon to assemble he had seen that there was plenty of his choicest hay accessible, and that an extra pole and post had been added to the long hitching-rack in front of the house.

The wide, long dining-room, built with a view to just such events, had been cleared of its usual furniture, and benches, contrived by the laying of planks on kegs and boxes, placed along the walls. At one end of the room were two barrels, and on these had been placed a couple of chairs for the orchestra. Fiddling Larry of the "Loop-and-L" was to officiate, assisted by Mr. Pete Sanchez, the barber of Fairfield, who "sawed a little now and then." This latter gentleman, by the way, had already arrived with his instrument, and, though at the time there was not a guest in sight, and the dancing could not begin for

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a good hour, had carefully seated himself on his barrel and was now steadily confronting the vacant room.

The expectant Colonel, on his piazza, tranquilly stroked his goatee and smiled at the encroaching sounds of vitality.

In one of the groups of cavaliers rode the garrulous Jimsey, and he was playing Butternut false. With many a grin and eloquent gesture of the hand, he was telling of a late episode in which a friend of his, in the moonlight, had embraced a wild bear, thinking he was tame. His remarks from time to time, were greeted with howls.

"But you'll have to defend me, boys, if he ever knows I told! You all kin swear that I never mentioned any names!"

His companions screeched tumultuously.

"You bet," sawed a heavy voice, "and tame b'ars air so powerful *thick* roun' hyer thet I reckon we *air* likely to git him confused—haw! haw! haw!"

Another cluster of blithe riders, descending the last hill of their journey, burst hilariously into song:

"If you can't be a bell-cow, fall in behind."

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In delivering this chorus after the second stanza they were interrupted by a new sound.

Fiddling Larry came alone over the plain, his instrument held caressingly to his bosom, his cigarette twinkling like a lightning-bug. As he rode over a hill at a point which brought the ranch-house windows into view, he was suddenly moved to music, and, drawing his fiddle from its flannel bag, sent the strains of "Suwanee River" winding over the valley. And Larry was nothing if not a fiddler. He knew little of "minors" or "flats," but the way he could pluck the soul from his instrument was a revelation. From softest cadence to the deepest mellow notes he could trill with a master's skill, and as he now gave this sentimental air to the breezeless night, all human voices were stilled. It was this sudden stream of melody that cleft the cowboys' chorus in half, and it also caused Jimsey, further detailing his "story," to pause in the act of gesturing, his hand suspended in the air. In but one quarter, however, did it come near to having a calamitous effect. Winding across the valley, and stealing in at the windows of the Colonel's dining-room, it caught

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the ear of the barber of Fairfield, and aroused him so abruptly from his state of abstraction that he narrowly escaped toppling from his barrel and bringing disaster to his instrument. He had not heard Fiddling Larry, the musician. He had heard the leader of the orchestra, and like a trained soldier had given attention.

Of course all the revelers did not reach the Colonel's at the same time, nor yet in the same hour. From one to forty miles they had come, and, while most of them had timed their start according to distance, it was near ten o'clock before there was a gathering of importance.

Besides Fiddling Larry and the barber of Fairfield, there was another man who came alone to this event. Butternut, on his calico pony, rode thoughtfully through the hills, just as he had ridden for the mail a week before. At home, by an invented pretext, he had sent his comrades ahead and spent an hour with his books before starting on the twelve-mile journey. He had been tempted not to come at all, for *she*, of course, would not be there, and, aside from her and his very

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best book, he had come to find little of interest in his days. His romance had become a serious thing, and it pained him the way this woman, of whom he had seen so little, held his heart. He should have known that presence is secondary in the growth of such matters, but then he was a Lambkin. He reasoned most convincingly to himself that she would not be at the dance. Used as she was to more "polite" gaieties, the varied pleasures of city life—not always more intellectual, to be sure, but certainly more fashionable—the rough frivolities of a cowboy dance, miles distant, would scarcely appeal to her as an attraction. Hence, why should he go? Not because he was in love with Captain Kitty did he ask this—of course not. He had merely found a certain pleasure in her society which made other things seem barren and empty. This dance, for example, with her absent, would be a mere subterfuge. So again, why should he go? Well, for the same reason, perhaps, that a man sometimes drinks to excess—to find oblivion from his woes, to shed his mental burdens like a garment. Although he knew (to a certainty!) that he did

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not love her, he nevertheless reflected that in Missouri she probably had a score or more admirers, all distinguished in their chosen walks, men of worldly power and success. The thought caused him to smile rather piteously at the important figure *he* must present to her eyes—a casual and penniless cowboy! Compared to men of fortune and power, he was merely one of a vast number, like the cattle on the plains. Of course he would have never indulged in such self-abasement had he felt that he had done his best. It was the consciousness that he had been delinquent in the light of his own standards that hurt. “A man with talents who neglects them is worse than a talentless man, for he is trampling on angels.” He had read something like that recently in a new book, and it had smitten him to the quick.

As the Lambkin dismounted at the Colonel's house, and hitched the calico pony among the earlier equine arrivals, the first dance ended, the jubilant fiddles ceased, and the laughter and talk of perspiring rioters flooded the night. By the time he had lightened girth, hung his spurs on his saddle-horn,

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and foraged some hay from the Colonel's store, the set for the next "quadrille" was forming. The Lambkin with an extra handkerchief flicked the dust from his boots, felt the studied carelessness of his tie, and, passing into the hall, dropped his hat in a corner. The master of ceremonies was bawling "Two more couples!" when he met the Colonel's young wife at the far end of the hall. To this lady he made his most flexible bow, and receiving a nod of understanding, they "sa-shayed" at once toward the middle of the ballroom.

Instantly cries of "Let's play bear!" "Who'll be the bear!" rang through the room, but the smiling Lambkin stood unmoved. He had expected this, and was therefore enabled to gossip in a delighted and absorbed manner with his partner while his facetious comrades shouted themselves hoarse. He, of course, yearned to throttle Jimsey, but that gentleman was protecting himself by staying with the ladies, and besides the future would provide a better time.

Suddenly the Lambkin's feet seemed frozen to the floor. The last couple needed

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had come forward, and, trailing an eye in their direction, he beheld the gallant McCormick, and on his arm Captain Kitty, who had just arrived. The fiddlers striking up at the instant had drawn her attention toward them, so his gaze flew quickly to another quarter, and he thanked his stars that he had seen her when she was not looking his way, thus gaining time to calm himself. Now he was all ease and blithely conversing with his partner, while his drooping eye counted the skirts round the circle to his left. She would be the fourth he would swing!

“Balance all!” bawled the prompter, and the whirl began. As he reached and swung her, the greeting she gave him was deliciously cordial—everything he could wish—and as he felt her warm fingers he could not for his life prevent a flush from suffusing him to the hair. He had passed her in a breath, however, and was softly cursing himself, though he was the best-dressed man on the floor. He “spotted” her uncle, a florid but agreeable looking man in city clothes, standing in the doorway with the Colonel.

“Chase and swing! Grand right and

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left!" called the resonant master of proceedings.

"Did you see Snuffles—I mean Boodler, as you came in?" he asked, when they next circled together. Her eyes went wide with such genuine pleasure that he was consumed with remorse for the ruse he had in mind. But before he could speak again the arm of the next gallant had abducted her.

The dance concluded, he went to her, and she presented him in the friendliest fashion to her uncle, after which she demanded to be taken at once to Boodler. He led her out into the moonlight, through the yard to a side gate, and on out to the farthest wagon, with its two horses haltered to the wheels, munching hay.

"I hope you won't kill me, ma'am," he said, in his gentlest drawl, "if I tell you Boodler is not here."

"Why, you said——"

"I asked if you'd seen him as you went in."

She was not the woman who could fail to relish the motive for his guile, but she had to appear displeased.

"You came some distance to apologize."

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"Madam," he said, softly, "I came to give and receive a reprimand, and such things are not for the whole population to hear."

"You came to give one?"

"Yes'm. I was wonderin' if you called this ambition?"

She remembered her upbraiding banter, and said hastily:

"Let's don't talk of ambition to-night. Spartacus has been over to see us."

"Yes! McCormick *did* tell me he saw him visitin' at your place. He's some bigger than Cookies, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's a monster. It can't be true that General Custer whipped him?"

He smiled at the remembrance of that lively and memorable affray.

"Yes'm. It's terribly hard to believe, but it's true as preachin'. And you'd never think it of the general, would you?"

"I'd never think it of *Spartacus*. I guess I won't tell Jimsey, he'd be so broken-hearted."

"Oh, he wouldn't believe you. He thinks the world of Spartacus since the day he hauled us out of a fix."

"Oh, then that is true!" she cried,

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quickly. "I thought maybe that was just a 'story.'"

"Jimsey been tellin' you that? Well, it's quite true."

Then, she thought to herself, Jimsey's *climax* must also be true.

She had seated herself on the slanting wagon-tongue, while he rested his right foot among the spokes. Thus in speaking to him she was obliged to look up, and the moonlight striking full upon her, he caught her rare round face at its best.

"Look at that ring around the moon!" she cried, suddenly, with unconscious seriousness. "What is it there for?"

"I can't say," he drawled, as he looked, "unless the lady up there's givin' a circus."

He was all levity now, for even if he blushed she could not discern it, though the moonlight was strong. She laughed unrestrainedly, for the reason that she could not help it.

"Why do you think there's a lady there?"

"Well," he said, deliberating, "I don't know, unless it's because if there wasn't a man wouldn't stay."

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He was so much at ease in talking to her, without arrogance, and his wit was so free from the labored sort, that she was pleased with him, and he knew it.

"I scarcely expected you here to-night," he said, after the first silence.

"Indeed," she answered, quietly. "Was that why you came?"

He was caught unawares at this, but liked it, as a skilled fencer enjoys a touch of temper in the foeman's blade.

"I said 'scarcely,' ma'am. It was the hope that I'd be mistaken that brought me."

Felicitous invention! He thought to himself what an admirable lie, yet it worried not his conscience.

"Then, too," he went on, serenely, "we cattle fellows have little else to amuse us. But you are used to such better things. I thought maybe a cowboy dance would be too rough or unrefined to interest you."

"Rough! Unrefined!" she exclaimed, in sudden resentment. "They are the rarest and best people in the world. When you see one of them you see a man as he is. At a society 'function' in the cities it is hard to

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make distinctions in men, they all look so like automatons in their dress clothes, wearing the same set smile, and are so excessively polite. They torture you with their eternal patronizing airs, and think they're pleasing you. And the women are no better. Unnatural and miserable, yet they smile—smile—smile at anything you may say, and whether they hear it or not, so that if a sensible speech does come to the tongue, you don't feel like wasting it. But here all is sincerity. There is no 'put on' here. They wear their true feelings in their faces, expressing *themselves* in every action, and they know no etiquette that comes not from the heart. They're as natural and refreshing as the rocks and trees—I love them all!"

The Lambkin felt a flood of grateful feeling come over him.

"Miss Kitty," he said, warmly, "that was a right noble speech, and I'm powerfully proud to hear it." Then, suddenly, in his most innocent drawl:

"Could you ever love one of them in particular?"

The fiddles were in high glee, and the

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important bawl of the prompter came regularly through the night. From time to time one of the ponies feeding at the rear of the wagon put a peremptory hoof to the ground, and in the sleepy hollow beneath the trees the insects spun their drowsy song. As this startling query came to her, she glanced narrowly at him, but he was looking interestedly at the open windows. Did he refer to any one of the general lot, or to some one already individualized in his mind—perhaps *himself*?

“If you mean,” she said, finally, and with frankness, “the untutored ones, unfortunate in learning and breeding—I could not. I love them as a class, just as I love everything that is natural, honest, and good, but there must be mental equality and culture for the love you are thinking of. But if you mean those of them who have both culture and learning, as well as character, and have chosen this life not because unfitted for higher things, but because, perhaps, it was the best that offered at one time, then—I think *I could!*”

He was still looking at the fleeting figures

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of the dancers. The capable orchestra never flagged, and through the open windows came the shuffle and slide of the jouncing feet.

“Salute your ladies ! All together !
Ladies opposite the same ;
Hit the lumber with your leather,
Balance all ! and swing your dame !”

Something in his kaleidoscopic view of the whirling couples caused him to start suddenly and make a lightning movement of his hand to his side, while he turned with averted face from her. She observed a momentary rigidity in his figure, and instinctively knew that he had been stirred by some strong emotion, but it was perhaps as well that she had not seen the sudden white woe of his face. He turned almost instantly back to her, and at that moment the fiddles ceased.

“I believe I have the next dance,” he said, and his voice was steady and assuring.

They went into the house.

Then, his dance over, the Lambkin did a wild thing. Without making his good-bys, and seizing an opportune moment, he stole like a hunted person from the house. Mc-

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Cormick and Jimsey were in the path between the steps and the gate, but he passed without seeing them, and an instant later, beyond the yard, buckled on his spurs and, mounting, rode the calico pony madly through the night.

CHAPTER X

A PREVIOUS INCIDENT

WHAT did he see? Not the moonstruck levels, not the row of cottonwoods by the creek, certainly not the homeward trail, and it was well that Terrapin knew the road. The Lambkin was thinking of another trail, which wound, in his memory, alongside a cañon which led past an assembly of squat cabins, not many miles from the Circle-B. The denizens of the camp called it a town—Whitewater they had named it, and he had visited there frequently during his first year on the range. He remembered that the big cabin, known as “the Sable Serpent,” at the upper end of the gulch, had, by its hospitable and versatile manners, won great popularity among the inhabitants. It had a long plank bar, some chairs, and a stage inside, and outside a sign, flaming red, with a tall bottle in the foreground and a black snake coiled above

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it, taperingly, like a corkscrew. And the floor of this place was not always filled with chairs, but regularly each night the room was cleared and the space appropriated by hilarious men and women who swayed riotously to the whine of a wheezy violin. Often in passing he had heard the slump and slide of their feet and caught fleeting views of their figures swaggering by the windows, and once he had glimpsed the profile of the man who leaned his back to the wall and at intervals gave them guiding information. Later, being bolder, it had occurred to him one night to go in, and he went in, accompanied by McCormick, who was acquainted, and so made it easy for him. McCormick, among other ceremonies, presented him to the ladies, and this he did in royal fashion, as if each were a princess, and indeed perhaps they were in poor McCormick's eyes. "Violet, the Whippoorwill," was the one he had recommended to Butternut, who, new to the game, learned to regard all she did as the outgrowth of her admiration for him. She taught him the quadrille, and at the time of his quarrel with "Jemmy, the Shuffler," she had been on hand

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to care for his shattered wrist. Which was certainly very nice of her. Not every woman, he thought, would go to such trouble on his account. Accordingly, he grew convinced that she was of finer fabric than the others, and came to believe himself very lucky. Eventually he confided this to her, and she, amid tearful remorse that it should be impossible for him to think well of her, gave him various woful fragments of personal history which had never before been told to mortal ear—never! And he discovered a new name for her conduct, which was heroism. Finally it was clear to his mind that the world was bereft of all poetry save that which she inspired, and so began his worship of her. It followed naturally that he should ride over to Whitewater every Saturday night, with McCormick, whom he told about Violet's past, and McCormick was too generous to hint that she had told *him* the same thing so often that he could recite it offhand. To Butternut it was plain that nothing save the merciless force of circumstance had brought the Whippoorwill to her present station, and how could *she* have prevented that?

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Accordingly, he listened with profound sympathy to her, and was properly thrilled by her resolutions of reform, somehow unmindful that there was always a third witness to these conversations, and that was a long, dark bottle from which she at periods drew inspiration, and for which he paid.

Then on a careless night she had prevailed upon him to the extent of a single glass, whose influence, reenforced by her smiles, sent him wandering in delightful ways, with a weeping intelligence behind. She had really fancied him then, and the steps were few to the end of the gulch where lived the parson of this glad town. So when the unmeant words found his lips she was ready, and thus did one of his enchanted paths betray him, and lost Intelligence could only weep afresh as he entered the temple of destruction.

Few of the happenings of that hour had remained clear to him save the vital and vivid fact that he had been decently and properly married.

Then he had received a terrible blow. On the Saturday following he had ridden

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not unjoyously to the Sable Serpent, having brought her a buttercup from over the divide, and found her in the exclusive company of the Shuffler, to whom he had not heard her speak since the quarrel. And not only was she in his company, but it was plain that she was having a delightful time. The Shuffler's wit must be something delicious, for when he spoke she smiled most radiantly and drank his health. And the Lambkin discovered that, on his approach, her hilarity, instead of softening, became uproarious. He suddenly found himself in the awkward position of presenting a buttercup to a bride who was laughing at him. Then his folly grew tenfold. He demanded an explanation, and this of course threw her into convulsions. She wriggled through a prolonged spasm of mirth, and among other things called upon the Shuffler to bear her out in the opinion that the Lambkin was a fool—which the Shuffler did with alacrity. And the Lambkin, after squeezing the buttercup to powder in his grasp and withdrawing into the gulch, also concurred in this opinion.

He had never seen her since, and the

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wheel of her inclination taking her early beyond his hearing had spared him the trouble of turning his path.

But now had come another, a girl from Missouri, whom he had not been sure that he loved until to-night. He had thought it not wrong to put the other one far toward the back of his mind while he stole luxurious moments in this new and wonderful presence, until the delight of a great influence came to him. Then, in the same breath with that awakening, the dancers, through Colonel Baldwin's windows, like a sliding lantern on his vision, had become the dancers of the Sable Serpent, and he knew that because he loved her he was lost.

His remembrance of that night after the Shuffler episode had never terribly distressed him for the reason that there had come until now no other woman. It had required a certain condition to bring his folly home to him, and that condition was arrived to-night and had burnt upon his mind a picture of that hour in all its garish colors. Twice, as he galloped, he lifted his voice in a wild cry to the night. There, in truth, had he played

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the fool — then indeed had he been the Lambkin.

Thus the gentle Butternut at the end of his twelve miles slunk reelingly into his cabin, and, falling prone across his bunk, cried out his heart in an agony of despair and shame.

CHAPTER XI

THE TWIN BAR HAS A VISITOR

SINCE the day of her ride with Butter-nut on the River Road certain letters of Captain Kitty, in addition to those she sent her uncle, had been less frequent. She had also experienced occasional thoughtful or abstracted moods which, though not new with her, were unduly prolonged, and which her sagacious old aunt, Mrs. Camden Collett, coupling them with the irregularity of the letters mentioned, had come to regard with a suspicion not unmixed with alarm.

Mrs. Collett was not a wise woman, but at a remote period had maneuvered into matrimony, and she knew enough about "signs" to understand that it was time for apprehension.

"It's all that Jimsey's doings," she said, with a nervous setting together of her little teeth.

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The wily foreman and Mrs. Collett had no great liking for each other. Jimsey had accepted her as an institution at Twin Bar because she was Captain Kitty's aunt, and Mrs. Collett tolerated the foreman because he was, apparently, a necessity at the ranch. This astute lady hated the country and country life, but the city she loved—in fact, one dusty brick in a pavement was more to her than all the sweep and run of the rolling lands about Twin Bar. Having no money, she was dependent upon her brother, who, while supplying her prudently, thought very properly that she should attach herself to her niece in the capacity of motherly guide and protector, and whatever seemed proper to a brother with a bank account was law unto Mrs. Collett, for she, too, had the instincts of a politician.

From the time she had joined her niece at the ranch all her wiles and forces had been employed toward one object—a return to the city. But day by day Catherine seemed to drift farther beyond her reach into the hated, unintelligible life about her, and to poor, puzzled Mrs. Collett Foreman Jimsey was a sort

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of wicked magician at the gates of this strange world enticing her niece to the ruin which would inevitably come with her marriage to one of the terrible creatures that seemed as natural a product of the untamed country as the wild steer and the prairie grass. Every word that Jimsey uttered about Butternut turned into a dagger and swung over her head; every time the cowboy was praised in her presence she knew that another gray hair started in her temples. A marriage like that was too awful to contemplate. It could not be. She was mad to think such a thing possible when there was Dick Thorne, polished and wealthy, not to speak of all the others—dear Richard, who owned the finest house on the finest street in Kansas City, and was bereft of both parents! To preside in that house had so long been a glittering dream of Mrs. Collett's that the prospect of so worthy an ambition being thwarted struck her as nothing less than appalling.

On the second morning following the dance on Green Fork, Mrs. Collett was lingering in the dining-room, her brow knit in fine wrinkles over something Catherine had

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said about living forever in such a wonderful country, when her niece suddenly returned to the room.

"Uncle tells me, Aunt Bertha, that he asked Dick Thorne to pay us a visit, and is expecting him to-day."

"Oh, the darling fellow!" exclaimed Mrs. Collett, with a joyous move to embrace her niece. "Won't it be lovely to have him? Have you asked Jimsey to send the buggy?"

"I hadn't thought of it."

"Then leave it to me, dear."

The delighted woman was so impatient to triumph over Jimsey that she did not wait to summon him, but went at once to his quarters, where she found the foreman at a late breakfast.

"Is the surrey in condition?" she asked.

"Shines like a lookin'-glass, ma'am."

"The sorrel trotters in the stables?"

"Jest kickin' fer air, ma'am."

"Well, I want you to drive to the station this afternoon to meet Mr. Thorne." She made a pretended move to go, and turned to him again. "I suppose I had better tell you

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that Mr. Thorne is a very important visitor, and I expect you to have everything in the best order. He is much interested in my niece, and I am pleased to know that she returns his interest."

"Mr. Thorne, ma'am?" said Jimsey, in gentlemanly consternation.

"Yes. I don't think Miss Cloud will go back with him *this* time, but she's very impulsive, and I am prepared for anything."

Poor Jimsey almost gulped his cup in his effort to swallow his discomfiture with his coffee.

"I'll give him some news for Circle-B, anyway," mused the satisfied lady, as she left the room, believing that she had heard the last of the presumptuous foreman's insinuations regarding the odious Butternut.

An hour after Jimsey's departure for the station, Catherine, on horseback, set out in the same direction, leading a second horse that bore a man's saddle. Yielding to a sudden impulse, and recalling the many pleasures she owed to Dick Thorne (they had really been strong friends in the "society" whirl), she had decided to treat him to a ride

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and show him some of the country this very afternoon. Aunt Bertha observed her departure with a smile of supreme content. The indications, to her, were that things were settled at last.

Two miles from the station Catherine met Jimsey with his traveler. The foreman wore a look of subdued protest. To be asked to drive to the station instead of sending a hand was itself an indignity, but to be forced to drive a Mr. Thorne was injury unpardonable. That gentleman was not only untroubled, but profoundly at his ease. John Ramsgate's invitation to spend a season at Twin Bar had come to him like the announcement of a long-expected victory. He regarded it as a sort of road by which he and Catherine were to finally reach an understanding. True, it had been a little inconvenient for him to leave the city just then, but love is love, and his fashionable world had showed him few women that pleased him from so many points of view as Catherine. As he watched her advancing he congratulated himself, finding naught but assurance in the impatience which he understood had

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brought her thus to meet him. He had forgotten how amazingly beautiful she was, though he did not like to admit that his memory as a lover could be so inaccurate. She drew rein and waited, and looking more closely he felt that there was something new in her presence—something hinting of the majestic and unapproachable. It had long been a tormenting question with him whether she looked best in golf or in riding-habit, but to-day the point was settled.

"Heigh-o, Kit," he greeted, with the cheap familiarity of fashion, leaping from the surrey and going to her side.

"Hello, Dick," she answered, with the same meaningless freedom, but withdrawing the hand he was inclined to hold too long. "Here's a horse for you. Jump on."

His courtly attitude was spoiled, which was not pleasant. Then, a ride in his excessively neat traveling suit!

"You don't want me to ride with you in this dress, Kit? Your man here can take the horses and I'll drive you in."

"Idiot," she said, a little impatiently, "we are not on the Boulevard. Get on."

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He saw from her face that further hesitancy would be a mistake, so leaped into the saddle, and they rode toward the river.

Dick Thorne, man of wealth and society, was no bad figure on a horse, and because he was in city dress was certainly not to his discredit, but to Catherine he seemed so ill to fit the wild scenery about them that she could not restrain an amused smile. He caught the mirth in her eye, and, attributing it wholly to the absence of his riding dress, laughed with her.

"I call this taking a mean advantage," he railed, in playful scorn. "However, as long as you *have* made a show of me, I'm glad you are enjoying it."

"I was thinking your riding clothes wouldn't mend matters much," she said.

"I understand," he laughed. "You are so used to seeing nothing but cowboys that I'd look like a freak, even in my best dress. I say, Kit, how the dickens am I to make love to you on horseback?"

"Make love! For Heaven's sake, don't attempt anything so stupid." She recalled a day, along the River Road, when, with never

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a word of love, a certain man had thrilled her to the soul.

He saw that she was in deep earnest, and it occurred to him that his first idea about her unapproachableness had been no mistake. He thought to play upon her vanity.

"Do you know what I thought, Kit, when I caught sight of you on your horse?" Her eyes were wandering restlessly beyond him toward the river and the open hills. "I thought that if Queen Elizabeth had had the beauty of Scottish Mary she would have looked like you."

"Don't be silly, Dick. Why don't you look at those mountains?"

"What are they to me when I have your face?"

His admiration was honest, but it seemed to burn her in a furnace of humiliation. She was longing for a speech appropriate to the time and place, and here was a man paying worn-out compliments to a woman. Her silent lips sent him trailing for another approach.

"She used to be crazy about books," he said to himself, and ventured: "The Shelley

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Club wants you back, Kit. Say there's no genuine spirit left."

"Oh, don't," she pleaded, remembering how she had read Alastor in a brilliant room to a dozen mediocre intellects, and then dissected that flower made of a poet's heart until the empty applause had made her shiver.

"So you've given up culture for nature?" he asked, on another tack.

"They are the same."

"May I tell that to the Club?"

"No. And don't remind me of my pitiful attempts to be intellectual. There lives a man over there—on that ranch to the east—who can sit on the root of a cottonwood and look up at the leaves and read more Shelley than you or I will ever know."

"Indeed!" said Thorne, receiving his first alarm. "You've seen him do it, I suppose?"

"No. I hardly know him."

"Then how have you learned of his extraordinary—capacity?"

"From his eyes."

"Oh!" He took his second alarm. "Speaking eyes, I presume?"

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"No, silent eyes. The things in them are incommunicable."

"They seem to have informed *you* pretty well."

"About smaller things, yes; but I'll never get to the depths of them."

"Upon my word!"

"Upon mine, too," cried Catherine, laughing away the last minute which had surprised her as much as it had surprised Thorne.

"Kit!" he exclaimed, in sudden relief. "You made it all up!"

"I believe I did," said Catherine. Then they were both more comfortable than at any time since their meeting. Thorne held out his hand, and she took it frankly. To the man it meant that they were lovers, to the woman it meant that they could never be lovers, and each thought the other understood.

They were still cantering toward the river. The deep cañon of the Pecos along here is impassable for more than a hundred miles, save at two fords about three miles apart, and they were headed toward the lower ford.

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On every hand the great treeless plains rose wide and high and mountainous, but the face of Dick Thorne reflected the monotony he found in the landscape.

"I say, Kit, when are you coming back to the city? You don't call this living, do you?"

"Well, I wasn't particularly thrilled by it at first, but now the vastness of these rolling plains fascinates and delights me."

"I can see but one attraction in them."

"And that?"

"They'd make magnificent golf-links!"

His face was as solemn as the mountains, but she caught the twinkle of his bold, blue eye, and laughed heartily.

"I'm glad your true nature has showed itself, and you are not going to be silly."

"That one of your prairie animals?"

He pointed forward to a mounted figure on the plain, brought into view by a sudden curve and rise in the road, the figure of a handsome giant in a ranchman's suit, so perfectly appropriate that it might have been designed by a genius for the completion of harmony between man and dress. He

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was intently scanning the plain in front of him.

"Wouldn't be a bad-looking fellow in a decent suit," continued Thorne.

"It goes well with the prairie and the sky," said Catherine, smiling as she recognized McCormick.

"You seem to know him," said Thorne. "Is he the one with the eyes?"

"Well, he has eyes, I think you'll find," said Catherine, with a droop of her own that completed the lie, for her remark was a guard-piece hastily thrown up as her sweeping glance fell on Butternut, who, with several companions, waited in the shadow of a hill. "Come on and I'll introduce you."

"Introduce——!"

His surprise died in a gasp, for Catherine was riding to McCormick, and the introduction followed as soon as Thorne came up. McCormick's heart had thumped down toward his boots as his eye fell on the man in "city" clothes, but Catherine's cordial greeting restored it to its normal position. Thorne seemed the troubled one now, for the cowboy proved to be still handsomer at close view,

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and his eyes were a deep blue, to which the lover's suspicion added the quality of dreaminess.

"Aren't you afraid the Cross-S will take you up for trespassing, Mr. McCormick?" said Catherine. "I've heard that the men over there are not in love with their neighbors. They own all the land down to the river, don't they?"

"More, too, Miss Kitty," said the giant with a courteous sweep of his sombrero. "Since the Pecos Cattle Company bought the Cross-S they've got holt o' the hull valley, 'n' they've picked the country for the meanest lot o' rascals that ever camped together. *Had* to, I reckon, fer a honest man wouldn't work fer the skinny ol' company."

Butternut rode up, and Catherine received him with a little smile and bow. The Lambkin's object in advancing was to stop McCormick's talk at the proper place, but nothing could stem the giant's eagerness to maintain a conversation with Captain Kitty.

"I hope they are not giving you trouble?" she said, making the hope a question.

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"Well, not *us* so much," replied the giant, in spite of a raised lid from Butternut, "but they're actin' the blamed cuss to as decent folks as ever come into the country. The Berrys—five brothers they are—bought the Ogden strip that begins about a mile t'other side the ford, 'n' now the Cross-S has bought all round 'em 'n' is shuttin' 'em in from all the roads. The Berrys hev offered to sell, but the stingy ol' company ca'culates to run 'em out 'n' git their property for nothin'."

"Why, Mr. McCormick! We must do something about this. What an outrage!"

"Yes'm. That's jest it—a outrage, 'n' outrages are punishable by pistol or hemp in this country—whichever comes handiest."

"No, no," cried Catherine. "Don't do anything like that! The law will protect these poor people."

"Yes," said Butternut, in his gentlest voice, to which a quiet glitter in his eye gave singular emphasis, "it will when they're all dead. I'm thinkin', McCormick, we'd better move on. And you, Miss Cloud, had better not take up the Pecos road. Some o' the

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Cross-S delegates are hidin' along there, and a stray bullet is frequently more dangerous than a bullet well aimed."

She fancied an instant a studied distant-ness in his tones, but attributed it wholly to that mental tension naturally incident to a time of peril.

"Mr. Jones!" she cried, "this is terrible! Have you sent to the Twin Bar for help?"

"We can't allow a lady's ranch to be troubled, ma'am. There's no makin' sure where this will end, and the Twin Bar is practically in your charge."

"You see, Miss Kitty," said McCormick, still regarding it as his conversation, "I heard this mornin' that the Berrys was hevin' it lively, with the Cross-S after 'em for cuttin' wire fences—what I jest hoped they'd hev spunk enough to do—so I lopes over with what men could be spared, and we've been hevin' things purty hot all the evenin', 'n' one o' the Berrys, the youngest, is layin' over there dead now, t'other side the ford——"

"Mercies!" gasped Catherine. "This must stop at once!"

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“ I’m perfec’ly willin’, miss; but as we’re sit’yated at present it cain’t stop. We’re sorter caught here in a sack, ’n’ we’ve got to cut out. Ye see we was all on t’other side the river, makin’ together toward the upper ford, ’cept the youngest Berry. He was scoutin’ down to the south o’ us, ’n’ got too near the rascals, ’n’ they hit him plumb. We heard the shot, ’n’ come tearin’, but when we got to the trouble, all ’t we could see was three o’ the Cross-S critters makin’ over the ford. We hit after ’em, ’n’ was so rippin’ mad that we run ’em two miles this side, right into the enemy’s country. Then we see a bunch o’ the devils comin’ round a hill a mile ahead o’ us, ’n’ know’d that we was trapped. Bein’ so many, they’d ’a’ done us damage, ’n’ we ca’culate to git out whole if we kin.”

“ Then why don’t you go back at once? ” asked Catherine.

McCormick began to stammer, and Butternut took up the discourse:

“ Because when we rushed over the ford the gang we’d been scoutin’ for at the upper ford came boltin’ down, and they’re retired

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in the gully there now, waitin' to pepper our return track."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Now, Miss Cloud, you and your friend go back and get out o' this. You'll probably see a clump o' horsemen about two miles down the road, but just ride by and say nothin'. They'll not bother *you*. McCormick, we must cross the ford."

"You're not going to ride in there and let them fire on you?" trembled Catherine.

"Not exactly, ma'am," said McCormick, hurrying to save his position as general of the maneuvers. "We're goin' to make a run across the plain to the upper ford. They's a chaine they've left no men up there, 'n' they can't race up the windin' river 'n' beat us in."

"But if they've left men there?"

"Then we'll hev to locate 'em, that's all. Butternut, we'd better go single file."

"Oh!" cried Catherine, "so they can pick you off one at a time!"

"Not at all," grinned the giant. "If we ride in together they'll git the drop on the whole of us—jest what they're layin' for—'n' we won't git a back shot. But we don't expec'

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to play to their hand. We'll go in a few yards apart, 'n' they'll have to shoot at one man or keep quiet; then we've got 'em spotted 'n' kin fight it out."

"Who will ride first?" asked Catherine, in a low voice.

"Why," said McCormick, wonderingly, "I reckon I'm leadin' the party."

"And I," said Butternut, quietly, "will go second if you will ride Terrapin, McCormick."

"Change now," said the giant, and accordingly they did.

Catherine's wonderment was lost in the sudden chill which she felt at her heart. Butternut was to ride *second*, and she had said he was brave to his very face.

"I'm thinkin'," pursued McCormick, as he glanced at the sun, "as it's such a short time till night, we'd better wait. There's a good moon, but our chainces 'll be better, 'n' I reckon there's re'lly no danger of 'em closin' in on us here 's long as they've got the ford."

"We can't wait, McCormick," said Butternut, impatiently. "Maybe some of them

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have crossed the river and gone to the Berry house, and there's the poor old woman——”

“What! not alone!” cried Catherine. “Why didn't you tell me? I will go to her at once.”

Thorne, who had been politely silent, now became sufficiently animated to protest, and McCormick seconded him. Butternut preserved careful silence.

“You mustn't think of it, Miss Kitty,” said the giant. “It's too dangerous, for if we don't git the best o' them in the skirmish, they'll likely finish the job by firin' the house. No, you jest git on now, and I'll see what the men say about holdin' off till night.”

The giant rode off with his head in the air, sorry to leave Captain Kitty, but glad to pose in her eyes as “the leader of the party.” Butternut ought to have gone too, but as Catherine lingered he made no move.

“Mr. Jones— Oh, I did not introduce you to Mr. Thorne. You must get the men to wait. I'm going to ride home as fast as I can, and send all the men from Twin Bar to the upper ford by the north road.”

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"Please do nothing, Miss Cloud. Your uncle— You will get the men into trouble."

"If you think they would displease my uncle in coming, I must let you know that Mr. Ramsgate is not that kind of a man. Moreover, he is a friend of Senator Ardell's, and if there is no law to protect people in the condition of this poor family, he will *make* one. Mr. Ardell will do anything for my uncle."

The Lambkin bowed apologetically as he said:

"Miss Cloud, I will tell you what you must soon learn. Mr. Ardell controls the cattle company, now owning the Cross-S, and these men are acting under his orders. Justice can not be got out of him, because it isn't in him."

"Mr. Ardell does own the Cross-S, Kitty," said Thorne, who saw an opportunity to get in an impressive word, "and," turning to Butternut, "I happen to know that he will be at his ranch to-morrow. My uncle, Judge Thorne, knew that he was coming down, and asked me to see him on some personal business. I give you my word that

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he will be persuaded to do the Berrys justice."

"Thank you, Richard," said Catherine, almost proud of him.

"I thank you, too," said Butternut, unconsciously adopting the polite language of Thorne; "but you are setting yourself an impossible task."

McCormick now returned to them, followed by the Circle-B men and the Berrys.

"The vote is to wait," said the giant, simply.

"Mr. Jones seems to wish no help," said Catherine, addressing the big cowboy, "but I will send you our men as quick as I can. Meanwhile I hope you will accept Mr. Thorne's service."

The polite face of Thorne showed that he was a little dazed by this remark, not so much because he was lacking in courage, perhaps, as because he had not been expecting it.

"We'll be glad to hev him among us," said McCormick, with a smile of broad patronage toward the man from the city. But if Thorne felt any apprehension as to

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entering upon such a style of warfare, he was wise enough to hide it from his lady-love.

"I shall be happy to join you, gentlemen," he said quickly, "if you will oblige me with a weapon."

McCormick doubted if he meant it, but courteously ordered a rigid search in his interest, which, however—due, perhaps, to an adroit but comprehensive wink from the cowboy—failed to develop any spare arms. The city man, to their minds, looked entirely too incongruous to figure seriously in this matter. Thorne, therefore, was obliged to ride regretfully away with Captain Kitty.

Down the road they espied the "clump of horsemen," but rode by them unchallenged.

"My plan," said Thorne, "would be to fight it out in daylight."

"And I should take moonlight," said Catherine. "It was a wise idea, I think, of Mr. McCormick's."

"That's because you like him," he said. "Funny how you gentle creatures always lean to these lumberly giants. Now the slim

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fellow was miles ahead of him, to my mind. He had *grace*."

"Which one?" she asked, quickly, while her heart seemed touched with flame.

"Why, the one you called Jones. You didn't seem to notice him until he made you half mad. And he was the only one worth looking at. He's as trim as a deer. Put him in decent clothes, and a woman might well look at him—more than once, too."

"Rather dull, wasn't he?" she asked, with shrewd indifference, her tone making him pursue the theme.

"Dull! His eye cuts like a brier! Didn't you get the flash of it when he said the law will protect them 'when they're all dead'? 'When they're all dead,'" he repeated, mocking the Lambkin's drawl. "He quite took me. I'd like to have him up in the city, and I wouldn't be ashamed of him either. He would fit anywhere."

"I suppose you mean in society's drawing-room?"

"Well, he would know where to put his feet, I imagine."

"What an accomplishment!" she said,

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hating Thorne for this picture of her "product" of nature, her knight of the plains, while almost loving him for his recognition of Butternut's peculiar attractiveness.

"The big fellow," continued Thorne, "might do for a coachman."

She was not particularly interested in McCormick, but this was too much for her to pass in silence.

"Neither money nor misfortune, Richard," she flashed, "can ever put the spirit of a flunkey into a cowboy. They are all *men!*"

He promptly and profusely apologized.

"Well, by Jove, Kit, I see that I've got to watch my tongue."

She readily forgave him. For had he not praised Butternut? But, as this thought brought the Lambkin again to her mind, for the second time her heart seemed suddenly chilled. He was to ride *second!* Some women in some humors would rather see the death of the man than the death of their ideal. Her ideal would have ridden *first*.

CHAPTER XII

CATHERINE TAKES THE SADDLE

WHEN Jimsey reached home he took Mr. Thorne's bag from the surrey with due outward respect, for Mrs. Collett was watching from an upper window, but when he deposited the hated property in the room which had been made delightful for its prospective occupant, he gave it a kick that would have endangered any breakable contents. Then he sat down and made himself as miserable as possible.

"It's all over with Lambkin," he groaned, "and blame me if I kin ever look in his face and tell him."

His musing was interrupted by Mrs. Collett.

"I wish to make sure that everything is ready in the dear boy's room. He is so fastidious. More particular, even, than Cath-

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erine, I'm afraid. Poor, thoughtless child! I hope she will be able to please him."

This mental picture of so much beauty and sweetness degraded to the occupation of pleasing the clay figure he had met at the station was too much for Jimsey, and to prevent an explosion he hastened to his quarters, where he nursed it out.

About dusk John Ramsgate arrived from Langtry, a progressive town some thirty miles south of Twin Bar. He seemed preoccupied with business, and went at once to his room, while Mrs. Collett hurried preparations for dinner. Orders had been given early for as elaborate a meal as the ranch could provide, and all the servants knew that Mr. Thorne was a very important visitor indeed.

That gentleman and Catherine rode up a few minutes after Mr. Ramsgate's arrival. Mrs. Collett greeted Thorne with the ceremonious familiarity of a new relative.

"I suppose I may," she said, planting a measured kiss on his forehead which was intended to tell him that she knew all. But if she did her knowledge was considerably more extensive than Thorne's. He was beginning

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to find out that he knew nothing. Catherine was the only one who was growing in knowledge.

"Your uncle has come, my dear," said Mrs. Collett.

"Oh!" Catherine turned to Thorne with a flourish. "Now it will be all right!"

Mrs. Collett, thinking the exclamation referred to the engagement, felt a thrill of delight trickle clear to her toes.

"Here he is," called the girl, on her way to her uncle's room.

"Yes," said Mr. Ramsgate, at the head of the stairs, "here we are."

For Catherine was already up the stairs and in his arms. She brought him down caressingly, and he greeted Thorne with a most cordial hand. He was fond of Thorne, for political reasons, the young man's relationship to Judge Thorne being something to be valued.

"My dear fellow! Glad to see you here. Must have taken a strong pull to get you down in this wilderness."

"Oh, uncle," cried Catherine, unable to wait for ceremony, "there's trouble at——"

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“Trouble, my dear? Well, we’ll take it after dinner. You must be ready to pick a bone, Richard.”

This was a literal fact; Thorne was ready to pick a bone. The man of golf and fashion had been so full of dreams of Catherine and conquest that he had failed to leave the train when it stopped for dinner, and his fast had combined with his long ride to give his methodically fed stomach the cravings of a cannibal. The sudden mention of dinner, therefore, rather upset his discretion, and he responded with a palpable eagerness that he was quite ready to dine.

“Brush up, then, both of you, and we’ll begin.”

Thorne was shown to his room and Catherine went to hers, her heart beating hotly and her temples singing. He could think of eating when nine men might be dying! As for her uncle, she saw that he was in his most pompous and selfish mood, and that she would really gain time with him by waiting until he was comfortably settled at his dinner. But the loss of a minute was almost intolerable to her, and brought her impulsive

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being the keenest physical as well as mental suffering.

"I hope, sister, that you've something a man can really eat," Mr. Ramsgate was saying as she entered the dining-room. Mrs. Collett, knowing the dinner was a triumph, smiled with beseeching deprecation. "How can they?" thought Catherine. "But they don't know." And she became more enraged with Thorne, who did know.

"I've sent for my foreman," said Mr. Ramsgate. "I can take his report now, and you won't mind a busy man, Richard. I haven't many more nights here, and *I* am not here for pleasure, you know. By the way, anybody know anything about that muss at the Cross-S? Ardell is owner there now."

"Uncle," said Catherine, on her feet, "that's the trouble. You must send help at once—to the upper ford—all the men——"

Jimsey entered unobserved and stood respectfully.

"Tut! You don't mean to say there's a fight on?" said Mr. Ramsgate, with a cut into the roast and a satisfied sniff.

"Oh, yes, yes!"

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"Can't be any danger. Sit down! Sit *down!* The Cross-S has enough men to take care of it if those fool farmers are so stark mad as to make a fight."

"The Cross-S! It's the Cattle Company that's making all the trouble! You don't understand! They've shut those poor people in—cut them off from all the roads, and won't buy their property, and now they are trying to kill them!"

"Serve 'em right. They've been cuttin' the fences. I know somethin'. Come, miss, eat your dinner. Richard, don't let this take your appetite. Sit down, Catherine. Don't show yourself a girl when I've been makin' a man of you. Yes, Richard, she's been right handy to me since I bought these diggin's."

"You won't send any help to the Berrys?"

"Not by Tom Walker! Eh, Jimsey, you hear me? If any man wants to go, let him take his pay and his grip-sack with him."

"And you won't ask Mr. Ardell to buy their property?"

"No! What's the use of tryin' to look after people that have no more sense than to buy a little strip o' land that can be fenced in?"

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"And you won't get a law passed to protect people in such cases?"

"No! Laws are not made for fools!"

"Then you are not a law-maker, but a law-breaker, a murderer, and a thief!"

The company rose to its several feet. Catherine's brown eyes, gleaming with twelfth-century fires, radiated light that seemed to burn the whole room. John Rams-gate made a step in her direction as if he would seize and shake her, but he dropped his hand, for even he felt the magnificence of her anger.

Mrs. Collett in a flash saw a vision of Catherine disinherited by her uncle and in turn rejected by Richard, and herself very far away from the finest house on the finest street in Kansas City, and she saved the situation by the worst nervous attack of her life. It really seemed probable for a few moments that she would not live.

"Auntie, dear auntie!" sobbed Catherine, on her knees.

"John, John! You will forgive her—forgive her!" Mrs. Collett finally murmured.

"Of course, my dear, of course. Don't

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let that trouble you. Come, Catherine, kiss me, girl, and tell your old uncle you were a little fool."

So Catherine, feeling that there must be something about it all which she could not understand, and which would be explained, kissed him, and Mrs. Collett revived to such an extent that the dinner proceeded. Jimsey was interviewed and dismissed. During the occupation of Mr. Ramsgate with his foreman Mrs. Collett murmured tentatively to Richard, whose seat was next hers:

"What *must* you think of her?"

"I think that she is glorious," returned Richard, who had eaten expeditiously and well. "Wouldn't have missed it for a goldmine, by Jove! Did you ever see anything so gorgeous? Hard on the senator, though."

"Ah, you understand her! You will not mind these moods?"

"She can have as many as she likes if she'll only let me be there to see."

"You *are* in love," said happy Mrs. Collett, patting his hand under the table.

In the large sitting-room, with its easy-chairs, piano, scattered music and books, con-

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versation ran along easily, without reference to the explosive subject, until Mr. Ramsgate thought it safe and timely to touch upon it for the last time. He knew there must always be a rounding-up and a final word where a woman has interested herself in a matter.

"My captain mustn't be worried," he said. "It's all a bluff with the Cross-S. They don't want to draw blood. Ardell can't afford to have a big stir just now. He'll call the men off. Probably he's telegraphed already. Anyway, I know he don't mean blood with politics like they are. So you be easy and just keep your noddle out of the business. Worryin' won't bring beauty-sleep, will it, Richard?"

Thorne airily suggested that she did not need to concern herself about that sort of sleep, and offered to ride down to the Berry place the next day and bring her news from the spot. At which Catherine looked at him and rippled a laugh that made him uneasy.

"Wouldn't you like to hear?" he asked.

"No—not to-morrow."

"That's little Kitty," laughed her uncle,

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"just as she was when a baby. Vixen one minute and angel the next. You see, Richard, it's all over now, and she's just as sensible as I am. By gracious!" he finished suddenly, jumping up, "I forgot that confounded bag of papers. Must get them off in the morning. Sorry I can't be with you this evening, but guess you won't miss me. Good night! Good night, Bertha, and good night, my little Kitty."

As he went out Catherine leaned over her aunt and whispered, "You will stay with me, auntie?"

"The darling child," thought Mrs. Collett, "who could ever believe her to be so timid with all that fire in her?"

Catherine was just, and she felt that she had not given Richard a fair chance. She had demanded that he should show the same spirit on his arrival that had grown up in her after months of breathing in that magical atmosphere. He had not had a fair trial, and she would be kind to him—until he got away—and through him to-night she would say good-by to the old fashionable life, much of which had been dear to her. So

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she played to him and sang one or two ballads that he asked for, and all with such mystic tenderness and hovering manner that Mrs. Collett was quite deceived, and Jimsey, coming into the room to make an inquiry, caught one of her "good-by" smiles to Richard that turned him cold to his boots. And she was thinking, as she smiled, "They may be dying now—nine of them—dying now." Thorne was entranced. He had never dreamed that she could be so dear, so sweet, or that his love could be so strong. Would her aunt never go away?

Catherine sang again, while she asked herself, "Are they going across the ford now? Is McCormick dead? Is the *second* man dead? Is the man Berry, the youngest one, still lying on the plain? Does the old mother know?"

She closed the piano.

"No more?" appealed Thorne.

"No more to-night. I—am tired."

"But you will stay?" he implored, for she was leaving the room.

"No, no! I—am really tired. To-morrow!"

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Voice and face were gone, and Dick Thorne was left staring.

"Poor child! I did not know she had so much feeling," said Mrs. Collett. "You have stirred her to her inmost self, my dear Richard."

Before ascending the stairs Catherine went into the dining-room, and, throwing open a window, gazed in the direction where she knew the river lay. Jimsey's voice came out of the dark:

"Miss Kitty, tell me about it."

And she told him every detail. Jimsey at once disclosed his intention of riding to the ford.

"No," said Catherine. "*One* more would not help."

"I want to go to Butternut," persisted Jimsey, like a child.

"Jimsey," she said, putting the question that had long been burning in her heart, "what made him ask McCormick to ride Terrapin when he loves him so?"

"I reckon he wanted him where he was least likely to git hurt," said the foreman.

"What do you mean, Jimsey?"

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“Why, in a ambush like what they’d form at the river the first man’ll stand the best chaine o’ gittin’ through. The watchers’ll hold their fire till they’re shore it ain’t a bait jest to locate ’em and allow ’em to be flanked from another quarter, and by the time the second man’s in sight the first may be purty near across. It’s the second man that’s in most danger.”

Catherine, faint and dizzy, dragged her heavy feet up the stairs. She seemed very, very tired. In her room she dropped to the floor, because the bed was on the other side of the apartment, and that was many, many miles away. She was a girl of momentum. Consciously or unconsciously she swept forward with all her strong, enthusiastic being, and when dashed back, as now, she lay with her wrecked forces like a drowning thing under rolling waves. Her nature was of the simplest kind, instead of the most complex, as those who thought they knew her best supposed it to be. Right was right, and the eye once on it there could be no other star. All the hesitations, the mincing, picking steps, the byways and underways of caution, pru-

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dence and policy, were but things to laugh at to this girl of moral momentum obeying in veins and soul the law that in the physical world sends a whirling body to its goal.

After an hour or two she began to move a little. There was a silent house about her. A horse neighed loudly from the stables. She leaped to her feet as if the sound were a signal for which she had waited. While there seemed nothing to do she could not move, but now all her strength rushed back with a sudden resolve to act. She let herself noiselessly out of the house, went to the stables, and saddled her pony. There was a light at her uncle's window; he was still at his bag of papers. She led her horse gently out of hearing, mounted, and sped over the plain toward the Pecos.

CHAPTER XIII

THE UPPER FORD

THREE miles out Catherine struck the road that led to the upper ford. Ten miles more and the black line of the river bluff stretched before her. A hundred yards from the ford she halted and listened. There were no sounds that might be made by horse or man. It was all over, she told herself. It had happened while she was playing the piano and singing ballads to Dick Thorne.

She rode on toward the river, reproaching herself for feeling so safe. "How did *he* feel?" she asked. Soon she could see through the cut, down which the road sloped to the river, and catch the glimmer of the moon on the red water. "They were in there," she said. She turned her horse at the entrance to the cut, and rode up to the very edge of the bluff, from which point she gazed alternately at the rolling river, bright

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under the stars, and the vast plains that seemed everywhere. On what fragrant seas the dying soul might drift out from that place! She thought of the oaths that, perhaps, had mingled with the breath of the river, and wondered as she shuddered if somehow all had not been made sweet in death. "It'll be a cold layout all around, I guess, if they're in thar," McCormick had said.

"Oh, the selfishness of a woman's heart!" said Catherine. "While I thought the greatest danger was another's I could stay away, and when I found it was—his—I came back."

She thought of the gentle lips and the smile that transformed the cowboy of the plains, eighteen hundred and ninety-three, to a Galahad bending with divine assurance over beauty in distress, while the forgotten moon played her beams on a vanished world. With most of us it is but a step from reality to romance. With Catherine it was no step at all. Each could be the other interchangeably. She did not feel lonely or strange. She belonged to the hour and the place, for love—the love that now she was proud to

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acknowledge—had brought her, and where love leads is woman's way.

She returned to the entrance to the cut, and pushed on to where the river lay, broad and tranquil. She wondered if there was blood in it, and whose? Her horse was splashing the water, his hoofs striking against the rock bed of the ford. The stream was shallow, but very wide, and the horse moved slowly over the uneven bottom. Midway she seemed to have already come a long voyage, and before her the dark opposite bluff seemed bending to the shore of a sea. She sat steadily, but fancied she was swaying, and at last on the opposite bank she slipped from her horse and leaned her rocking head against his shoulder until all was clear again. Then mounting, she rode for a mile over the lonely trail to the top of a gently climbing hill, and looked out over the great plains again, calm in the moonlight peace.

The road to the Berrys was clear. She passed the Cross-S line without trouble, for the cut pieces of wire fence which had been stretched across the road were trailing on the ground. The house which she presently saw

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ahead of her was small and unpainted, for its owners had spent most of their money for the land and cattle, intending to build more pretentiously when profits permitted.

"What will they think of me?" Catherine asked herself as she slowly neared the house. "No matter. There is a lonely woman there whose boy—the youngest one—is dead. I am going to *her*."

No light was seen through the carefully blinded windows, but when Catherine dismounted and went softly to the door she heard voices inside, and now and then a sob. A haze came over her. What was she there for? Was her strongest reason to be with the old woman? Away with the lie! It was to find out the names of the dead. The voices cleared to one steady, soothing tone, and as she recognized it she almost fainted on the steps.

When Butternut saw Catherine ride away with Thorne he wondered, and all through the events of the evening he continued to wonder. When he had seen her ride up with a man who was patently of the same tribe as herself, young, fairly good-looking, and un-

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mistakably her lover, he had swallowed the truth without a sign, as he would have swallowed hot coals and died had the performance been an inevitable duty. But when in the course of their talk he had discovered that there was no soul in the eye of the man when he looked at her, then had sorrow indeed possessed him. If Kitty Cloud was of a tribe with this man, what was to become of the heaven he had built where she shone the sole and single star? It was at his feet, a tawdry, tinsel, make-believe glitter, and there was only black void above.

“But she *offered* to go to the old woman,” he said, warming his dead idol in a glow of love instantly put out by the recurring picture of her riding away with Thorne. “She even looked mad at me,” he mused, desperately, sorrowing for the world that might have been had she chosen to smile. “I suppose they’re all alike—all the young ones. They have to be mothers, like mine and poor old Mrs. Berry, and love their children and the fathers of them before they are fit to be worshipped. We have to have our idols, and when we can’t find ’em, we make ’em, and

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fool ourselves into thinkin' God had the biggest hand in it, and sit down and admire. Now, if anybody had told me God didn't make *her*, I would have sorrowed for his ignorance; and all the time I was makin' her myself and revelin' in my handiwork."

McCormick and his men had passed the ford without a shot from ambush or a stir to suggest a hidden enemy, and proceeded without molestation to bring the body of James Berry home. Then the giant had led the men in hot haste to lie in wait at the lower ford for any invaders from the Cross-S, while the Lambkin remained with Mrs. Berry in case any of the Cattle Company's men should descend from the upper road to fire the house.

All the while Butternut thought he was putting Captain Kitty—in his mind—where he might never find her, and now, when he fancied the task about complete, he heard a light knock at the door.

"Who is there?"

"Catherine Cloud," came faintly from the other side, and he threw open the door to his instantly resurrected idol.

"Bless me, Miss Cloud, you here!" he

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said, drawing her to Mrs. Berry, who took the trembling hand from his. "This is Miss Cloud, Mrs. Berry, who has come to you because she knew you were in trouble. She's an angel."

"No," said Mrs. Berry, her dim old eyes taking light from Catherine's young ones, now glowing their brightest, "a good woman, which is a sight more useful in this world than angels, I reckon."

She clung to Catherine with a convulsive comfort which showed how she had longed for the touch of one of her sex.

"This is my boy, my dear," she said, turning to the body of her son. "My baby. He is still purty, you see. The only purty one I had, though they're all good sons enough, but Jimmie was always pettin' me an' makin' up for my lonesomeness an' the ol' friends I left back in Kentucky. Yes, I reckon he made a fool of his ol' mother, an' she was proud of it. Oh, miss," she said, falling on her knees, "I can stand it while he's lookin' purty like this—he's not gone yet; but what'll I do when he turns all dead an' they take him away from me?"

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For answer Catherine rocked the sobbing mother in her clasped arms, and mingled her tears with her own, while she refrained from the empty word-comfort which turns sorrow to rebellion.

“Thank you, my dear,” said the old woman at last, gently releasing herself, and taking the chair by her son’s body. “I’m just worryin’ you, you two young people. ’T has done me good, though, an’ you won’t mind. Though you’re so young, you can understand a mother’s feelin’s. Some women are born mothers, I say. Things may go cross-ways, an’ they may never have chick nor child o’ their own, but they’ve got more mother-feelin’ an’ understandin’ than many a woman with a full brood an’ extrys. An’ you’re one o’ them women, miss. I know’d it when you looked at me an’ looked at my boy. Mr. Jones here, he’s one of your kind, too—like a woman he’s been to me this night—but I see you’ve found that out for yourselves.” She paused to look from one flushed face to the other. “Well, there’s happiness ahead for you, for there’s nothin’ in this world makes the heart comfortable like find-

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in our own kind. High an' low, it's all the same. Why, trouble—trouble like this—would have a sort o' sweetness an' greatness in it if Berry was kneelin' here with me, because we found each other out to the bottom, an' were of a kind all through 'cept in the little outside ways that don't really count. You don't know your own blessedness yet, though you think you do; but when your hairs are white like mine, an' a boy o' yours lies like this, you'll know, if you look into each other's eyes then, what Mother Berry meant about a love that takes sorrow clean out o' the world. There's mighty little o' that sort o' love in the world, that's true, or there wouldn't be so much weepin' an' wailin', an' that's why you ought to bless God night an' day for lettin' you find each other out."

Catherine was now kneeling by the old woman's chair, her head on her breast. Butternut had involuntarily fallen to his knees on the other side of Mrs. Berry, who reached gently out and drew him to her until the bright brown curls touched his forehead and completed the spell that deprived him of his senses. For twenty thousand years of bliss he

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dreamed, then heavy steps approached, and, instantly rational, he rose and opened the door to the four Berrys, who entered led by the eldest, dark-whiskered and grim. He put a big arm around his mother.

"No more danger, little woman. It's all right." Turning to Butternut, he said, "I thank you. We'll watch now." And, in a lower tone, "The cowards hev certainly holed up. We kin rest till to-morrow." He looked a question at Catherine, "If the lady will accept a bed——"

"I must return at once," she said. "My aunt will be greatly frightened if I am missed. But I will come back, Mrs. Berry."

"I will see you home, of course," said Butternut, simply.

He took Mrs. Berry's hand, but she dropped it and clung to his neck. "God bless you, my boy, for your comfort to an old woman this night."

He left the room a little ahead of Catherine, which gave him an instant to finally clear his senses, and when she came out she found the placid, the inscrutable cowboy.

"Here's your hawss, ma'am, and here's

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your steppin'-block," he said, holding his hand for her foot.

She accepted his chivalrous aid, and started her horse off slowly. Butternut fumbled with his saddle. He had a hard game to play and a shaky hand. We all know that we can get through any sort of crisis if we are braced for it, but when it comes unexpectedly we sometimes stagger through with our surprised forces in a way that barely gets us off with credit. That was what the Lambkin was afraid he would do to-night, as he tried to steady himself. First he shook off the last folds of the dream that had enwrapped him for half an hour; then he told himself that the graceful woman riding ahead was Miss Cloud, who was engaged to a Mr. Thorne from the city, and lastly he repeated that he was Charley Jones, the married man. By neither word nor sign must he show his love.

"Tell me about the ford," she said, as he rode alongside, and in the language of the plains he told her of the crossing, which had turned out to be without hazard. But through his careless speech and manner she

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detected a certain restraint which gave her a strange feeling of exultation. He was too noble, she thought, to take advantage of the opportunity poor Mrs. Berry had given him—too noble, perhaps, to *ever* use an opportunity. But she was in no great haste in her dream. The way was so delightful—the way to the perfect understanding that she knew would come. She would gather fragrance from every flowering minute, and she was so sure of him that she laughed inwardly at his lapse into deferential cowboy tones.

After a quarter of a mile of silence it was a great relief to her to find a question which need not appear forced.

“What will the Berrys do?” she asked.

“They’ll go to Oklahoma, I guess. The papers, you know, have been full o’ the openin’ o’ the Cherokee Strip on the sixteenth, and they’re figurin’ on ‘makin’ the ride.’”

“Making the ride?”

“Yes’m, if they can get some good hawsses. Everybody, you see, will have to run for their claims from the border-line, and the best man will mean the quickest hawss.”

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He thought it wiser not to add that he, too, expected to "make the ride."

"But what will the Berrys do with their place?"

"Oh, that! Mr. Ardell is comin' down to-morrow, and we'll probably *persuade* him to buy it."

Unconsciously he had used Dick Thorne's word, but with what a different meaning! She caught the ominous note in his speech.

"How will you do it? Won't it be dangerous?"

The Lambkin's voice seemed far away as he replied:

"Not unless he's braver than the men he employs."

The unclouding moon at this point drew their attention to the landscape. They were rounding the low mountain overlooking the ford, and before them lay the sleeping valley, divided in half by the winding cañon of the Pecos.

"Isn't it weird?" said Catherine, almost under her breath. "But I love it—the great plains, the fragrance, and the whispering water!"

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From the time they had left the Berrys he had been struggling back to the real world, the world that held a Dick Thorne and a Whippoorwill, and now to save himself he thought constantly of the hour he was married—how he had stood up, the single witness, the slow words of the preacher. Was he drunk then? Yes. Not alone on a thoughtless glass, but on the charm of drooping black eyes, cheeks like a spring rose, lips curved to enchant and seduce—drunk with the wine of blind desire. Yes, he was drunker than the contents of any demijohn ever made a man when he stood up and swore to love, cherish, and honor the Whippoorwill of the Sable Serpent—a vow he might have held sacred, even in the face of the Shuffler episode, but for a certain utter hopelessness in the way she had laughed. And now he was intoxicated again. He lost his hold on memory—his anchor was gone—there was nothing but the present, the dreaming, silent plains, and the woman by his side. But the next instant he was himself, with his battle won. He laughed lightly as they rode toward the river, then he told her a legend,

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and his voice was as smooth as the flowing water.

"There's a funny epitaph over there on the side o' the mountain," he smiled, pointing diagonally across the river. "Man buried there is supposed to have written it himself. He was a poor man, and he had a rich brother whom he hated for no other reason than that he *was* rich. And when the brother died it made him mad to see him get a big monument with the words 'Erected by lovin' friends' on it. And just before *his* turn came he said to his old wife, 'Betsy, John got the best o' me in this life, but I'm blamed if he'll git the biggest monument. Put me at the foot of a mountain, and write on it these words, "Erected by the Lord—This beats John."'"

Thus lightly, half-humorously, he enlivened her journey, while the hand of recollection wrought misery on his heart.

"You left quite suddenly at the dance," she said abruptly, and caught him unprepared. Or was he ever that? An instant he seemed staggered, then:

"Suddenly!" he laughed. "So did Fid-

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dlin' Larry's hawss! Used as he is to a fiddle, smoke me if he didn't take a fool notion to break loose and hike out for home, and you ought to've seen Turtle Mose and me hoofin' it after him like a pair o' jack-rabbits! Why, that confounded hawss was worse'n ten wild Indians and was plumb to Devil's River before we got him!"

Ghost of Munchausen! Instead of remorse it brought a half-peace to his mind as he saw that she had accepted this plausible and unholy lie.

They crossed the river, and after what seemed a long while to him they rounded the foot of a hill, and the houses of her uncle's ranch were at hand.

"We seem to be here," he said, "and there's not an Indian or bear in sight. So good night!"

He was gone in an instant, and she heard his gay laugh as he rode away through the moonlight, but now there was a note in it—a note of emptiness—that chilled her soul.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SENATOR MAKES A PURCHASE

CATHERINE, refreshed by three hours' rest, came down to breakfast blooming with a radiance which communicated itself to the rest of the party. Thorne viewed her transported, Mrs. Collett chirped and nibbled and smiled, Mr. Ramsgate beamed paternally, and all made a merry meal. Near its close, happily for good appetites, Jimsey came in, saying that a passing horseman had brought news of the trouble the night before, and that he presumed they would like to hear how it came out, especially Miss Kitty.

"Oh, I don't care," said Catherine; "I know already."

"O-ho!" Mr. Ramsgate glared suspectingly over his cup, while Thorne looked his stupefaction.

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"I haven't seen the man," continued Catherine, "but I can tell you all about it. Nobody was hurt. The men passed over the ford, and not a shot was fired."

"That's so," mumbled Jimsey.

"What's the girl talking about?" puzzled her uncle. "None of your second-sight visions around me!"

"It's just what the man said," stammered Jimsey.

"How did you know, Catherine?" demanded Mrs. Collett.

"Mr. Jones told me."

Jimsey leaned against the wall.

"Mr.— That man! When did you see him?"

"Last night—or, rather, early this morning."

"Catherine! What do you mean?"

"Oh, I went to the Berry house."

"And that—Jones——"

"Escorted me home."

"Bertha," said Mr. Ramsgate huskily, "don't go into one of your fool fits now. This is serious."

There was heavy silence. Catherine took

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her last bite of toast. Jimsey discreetly fled. Thorne's usually stolid face was a study. She had made him believe it was that dull, lumbering giant, and it was—Jones! Fragments of his own praise came back to him—"What an eye! What grace! Would fit anywhere!"

"Now, Catherine," said Mr. Ramsgate, finally, in the level tones of a man holding a pistol that he intends shall not miss fire, "who is this Jones?"

"A young man who works at the Circle-B," said Catherine, gently, preferring that the weapon should not go off just then. "Richard offered to go for me this morning, but I didn't want to trouble a guest. Besides, I couldn't wait."

The senator roared:

"A farm-hand! A cow-puncher! A——"

"Gentleman!" cried Catherine, in a white blaze; then, turning, she swept through the open door and up the stairs to her room, and John Ramsgate knew that for a time it would be useless for his voice to follow her.

"John," began Mrs. Collett, "you won't be harsh——"

"My dear Bertha, please be quiet. The

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confounded country has made a wild-cat out of her."

Mr. Ramsgate rose and went out on the porch for air, Thorne following him. While Richard had no wish to appear hasty, he thought it a good time to make his visit to Ardell's, and after some moments of respectful silence mentioned the matter to his host.

"That's all right, Richard," waved the senator, blandly. "Sorry to have involved you in another family row, but it will blow over in a day or two, and we'll be glad to welcome you back. Want to try a horse? Then get into your riding-clothes. Jimsey will saddle up for you and show you the road."

A few hours afterward Richard, on a mettlesome steed, and having received minute directions from the Twin Bar foreman, was proceeding in a thoughtful mood toward the Cross-S ranch.

Meanwhile Butternut had not slept, but had returned to the Berry place by daylight, for there was much to do before the afternoon train would drop Senator Ardell at Comstock station. First there was the boy to

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be buried. Then Thomas packed up a few of his mother's belongings and drove with her to the station. In the meantime Butternut and the other brothers drove to Langtry, the nearest banking town, visited a lawyer, and made an inquiry or so at the bank. That done, they started for Comstock, and a few miles from that point halted on a road that led from the station to the Cross-S ranch. Perhaps half an hour they had waited, when a man drove up, evidently on his way to meet Mr. Ardell.

"Goin' for the senator, I suppose?"

"Yep," said the man. "You ain't hye'rd the whistle, hev you? I'm a bit late."

"And you'll be later, I'm afraid, my friend," said Andrew Berry, as he and his brothers seized the man and transferred him to their own vehicle, Butternut taking his place in the buggy. They then proceeded to Comstock by a roundabout way, while the Lambkin followed the road. Within a mile or two of the station he saw, grazing at a distance, an enormous, beautifully horned creature, and at once there swept through him an idea which not only pleased his pre-

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vailing sense of humor, but promised a ready escape from the embarrassment which might otherwise follow his coming transaction with the senator. When he reached the station, in line with this plan, he was busy for a moment at a rear wheel of the buggy.

The west-bound pulled up presently, and from it stepped forth Mr. Ardell. He looked about impatiently and met the glance of Butternut.

"You for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where's the trap?"

"Round this side, sir," said the Lambkin, most politely.

"Here, you! Take the bag."

An instant Butternut wondered whether he would take the satchel or kick it, but remembering his own interest in the contents, he picked it up and placed it in the buggy. Ardell jumped in and the Lambkin took the reins.

"I drove over from Langtry when I was down to look at the place."

"You don't know this road, then?" said Butternut.

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"No; but I should say the Cross-S is due north."

"Part of it—part of it, sir," explained the Lambkin. "You see, you've added a mighty wide and long and ramblin' stretch since you took in your new additions."

The cowboy was scanning the landscape, and suddenly seemed satisfied. He turned to the senator questioningly:

"I can cut off two miles by spinnin' across the prairie here, sir, and comin' out at the Forks. Reckon you won't mind gettin' a little sooner to your supper?"

"Snakes, no! That eating-house at Spofford is a scandal to the road." And as Butternut followed the "short cut" the senator settled himself with satisfaction.

"That's a mighty nice little place o' the Berrys," remarked the Lambkin, after a due interval.

This brought a keen look from Ardell, who became more impressed with the sagacity of this man's face. It might not be beneath his dignity to get a little information from such a source.

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"I hope Dawson is settling that matter all right."

"Well, it's been pretty quiet since your telegram yesterday stopped the shootin'. Nobody else was hurt, and they buried the man this mornin'."

"Eh? Somebody *was* killed, then?"

"Oh, yes; the youngest of the Berry boys."

"Stark fools! Why don't they leave the country instead of caperin' round in the face of fifty or sixty guns?"

"I reckon they want a little money to leave on, Senator."

"They'll get none from me," said Ardell, suddenly vicious, and casting a guarding eye on the black bag, a look which made the Lambkin's heart leap with exultation. There was no doubt now in his mind that the money was there! It was the custom of the ranchmen of that section to keep money on deposit at the Langtry bank for the monthly payment of their hands. Butternut had reasoned that Ardell would bring with him not only sufficient funds to pay off his men for the pre-

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ceding month, but a surplus to be deposited at Langtry for future convenience.

"It's a plumb nice strip o' land," said the Lambkin, softly, with a furtive eye on the plain to his left. "I thought maybe you'd conclude to take it."

"Don't want it! Let them sell where they can! Not a cent from me— Good God! What's that brute?"

"Lord, where?" exclaimed Butternut, in sympathetic alarm.

"On this side, man! Where are you looking?"

Butternut turned and looked at Spartacus as if it were the first time he had seen him that afternoon.

"That's the king, for a fact," he said leisurely, returning the gaze which the bull was directing upon them at a distance of a quarter of a mile.

"Never saw such an animal," breathed the senator. "Must be a cross between a buffalo and a steer."

"No, just a plain bull, but as fine a specimen as any fancier ever clapped eyes on. Want to round up and take a look?"

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"Isn't he dangerous?"

"Well, folks mostly want to give him the whole prairie; but there isn't a bit o' danger in him if you treat him respectfully. Best to give him the road always, and it might not be safe to meet him afoot here on his own ground. But, generally speakin', he's harmless."

His strategic tone of assurance was not lost on Ardell.

"Look here! That fellow could take this trap on his horns if he was a mind to."

"Yes—if he was a mind to."

"Say, cut back here and take the road."

"All right, sir."

Butternut made a very sharp turn; a hind wheel flew off, and Ardell sprawled outside the buggy.

"Thunderin' Moses! What's happened?"

"'Fraid we've lost a 'nut,' sir," replied Butternut, searching the ground and making sure at the same time that the "nut" he had carefully removed at the station was safe in his pocket.

Ardell's rage was a wonder to see.

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"What in almighty hell do you mean by twisting about like that?" he cried, dancing about the disabled vehicle. "Can't you drive?"

"Yes," said the Lambkin, in his smoothest voice, "I can drive, and do a few other things. You'd better keep quiet. I don't mind your cuttin' up, but you're becomin' a curiosity to the bull, and his attentions just at this moment might not be agreeable."

Ardell turned pale, gave a wild glance at the slowly circling and advancing bull, and cursed the cowboy in a fearful tone.

"Just stop now, Senator, and let's get to business. This accident affords me an opportunity, and I calculate to make use of it. Look at this paper, if you please."

He took the document, prepared by the Langtry lawyer, from the bosom of his shirt.

"A clean deed to the Berry property. You'll find it all right. What you've got to do, and do quick, is to take ten thousand dollars from that bag and hand it over for this deed."

"I see, you d——d scoundrel! This is your plot, is it?"

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"Yes, it's my plot!"

"Who are you?"

"That isn't the question. I'm *not* one of your men—that's enough."

"You idiot! Do you suppose I carry money about with me so men like you can help themselves?"

"I know you've got considerably more than I want right here in this satchel. Will you open it?"

"Give it here!" shouted Ardell, snatching his property. "What are you doing now?" he roared, beginning to understand Butternut's movements about the horse.

"Why," said the Lambkin, his eye on the task of unhitching, "as long as you won't trade, I'm just goin' to ride away. You don't suppose I want to stay here all day with an animal like *that* for company?" There was great alarm in his face.

Ardell, who was unarmed, looked calculatively at the cowboy, whose suppleness and strength was revealed in every rounded limb. No, he could not afford to make it a physical matter. Besides, there dangled at the Lambkin's hip a weapon at least a foot long.

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"I'll give you five thousand for the land if you'll let me on that horse!"

"Couldn't think of it, sir; it's worth fifteen," said Butternut, with another glance toward Spartacus, who in his capable fashion was pawing up the earth a hundred yards distant. "By George! He *is* comin'! Good-by, Senator!"

"Man alive, I'll be torn to pieces!"

"Maybe so. That's *your* business. If you care to trade, I'll give you the hawss and take my chances. You can make the thicket yonder." He pointed to a tangle of mesquit bushes at a low point in the valley. "It's pretty full o' briers, but they'll scarcely scratch like the king's horns."

Ardell began to dance about and utter oaths that ought to have shriveled the prairie grass. The Lambkin suddenly covered him with the ivory-handled Colt.

"If you think I'm afraid to shoot, Senator," he said smoothly, but with a steel in his eye that to Ardell was colder than the chill of death, "you're takin' a long chance. I consider you responsible for the murder of Jim Berry—it is known that your men

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were acting under your orders—and I've no Christian objection to helpin' the law to do its duty, sir, especially when it's inclined to neglect it. The bull will be here in two minutes; I'll give you *one* to make the trade and take the hawss!"

Ardell turned white as he looked at the cowboy, green as he looked at the surely approaching bull, then, opening the bag, handed Butternut a package of bills labeled "\$10,000" in the manner of banks, and sprang upon the horse, using the "tug" as a stirrup.

"You'll be hung in a month!" he roared.

The Lambkin handed him the deed, but kept his hold on the bit.

"Oh, no, Senator; I'm sure you'll conclude to keep this matter quiet. You know, in politics a man can't afford to figure ridiculous—it's dead ruin—and this scene might strike some as a bit humorous. A senator squattin' in the chaparral, with a mad-eyed bull switchin' his tail forty yards off, and——"

"Let go, you scoundrel!"

"Wait a minute, Senator; you still have a little time, and I wanted to say that if

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you're thinkin' of givin' me trouble for this, you'd better go lightly. There's a man named Rockwell runnin' a paper in St. Joe who made it hot for you once and is achin' to do it again. He'd give a stack o' money to know of this little incident; but I promise not to blow on you as long as you're not troublesome. But there's a stronger reason why you should keep still," concluded the Lambkin, and again that steel in his eye which fascinated Ardell; "you won't live long if you don't!"

"Let go, let go!" screamed Ardell. "The brute's coming!"

"The thicket, man, the thicket!" called the cowboy, releasing his hold, and the senator sped toward the brush-tangle, his coat-tails and bag flapping the air wildly. Abandoning the horse at the edge of the chaparral, he vanished in the brush, while Spartacus, who had probably meant no harm, being more curious than displeased, approached leisurely and, standing at a distance, directed an inquiring gaze upon the thicket.

The Lambkin politely doffed his sombrero to the bull.

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"Another royal turn you've done me. You're a gentleman, sir."

From the depths of the thicket came the sounds of a man who seemed to be swearing the bark off the bushes.

Butternut strode leisurely to the station, where he found the Berrys waiting with the Cross-S man, who stood meek and subservient. The Lambkin gave him the missing "nut," with full directions how to find the senator.

A quarter of an hour later the east-bound pulled out with Butternut, the Berrys, and the ten thousand dollars.

"He'll telegraph and stop us at Spofford," said Thomas Berry.

"Scarcely," said the Lambkin, as he sent a calm eye over the galloping landscape. "He's whipped, and knows it."

The future proved Butternut's conclusion correct. Senator Ardell not only kept quiet about the afternoon transaction, but his man received a special offering from the black bag to do the same. The prudent politician had decided to *buy* the Berry place.

CHAPTER XV

“NEVER A WORD OF LOVE!”

DICK THORNE was not specially wise, but he understood from the signs which had recently ruffled his horizon that if he desired to progress in his suit it was time for him to make a move, and that a telling step in the right direction would be the early fulfilment of his promise to Catherine to influence Senator Ardell to proper behavior. He was keenly disappointed, therefore, on broaching the subject that night at the Cross-S, to have the senator reply that he had already met an agent of the Berrys at the station and had promised to negotiate. Everything would be settled the next day at Langtry.

“I should have advised it, sir,” said Thorne, “were I old enough to speak to a man of your judgment. If I can attend to the matter at Langtry——”

“Not at all—that is, thank you, but every-

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thing's about settled, and there'll be little to do. How's old Ramsgate? Down here just now, I believe." Ardell, being ten years Mr. Ramsgate's senior, always alluded to him as old. "You and the girl have fixed things up, I hope. She's worth the trouble, my boy. Saw her at a ball once in St. Joe, and, by George! the rest of the women winked out like candles in a sixty-volt light. Blest if she didn't make me wish I was twenty-two instead of fifty-two. I'd have given you young squirrels a race."

"Fifty-two?" Thorne mildly interjected his surprise, knowing Ardell to be sixty-five. "No, no, Senator."

"Yes, my dear young chap—fifty-two—every day of it! Well, when is it coming off? You'll let an old fellow into the fun, won't you?"

Thorne flushed as he said:

"There's a little hitch at present, Senator, but I think the weather will clear."

He had no idea of abandoning his suit. Never had Catherine seemed so beautiful and so necessary to him. Her interest in this man Jones was surely nothing more than an idle

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inclination. An early day would find his prospects unclouded.

Over at Twin Bar matters had about settled to a state of paralytic comfort. Mr. Ramsgate had despatched messengers canceling a few engagements, while he made some inquiries. He was by no means as near a state of collapse as his ambitious sister, and learning that Butternut was a man of education, had told Aunt Bertha firmly that, while he was a politician to the core, he'd be tarred and feathered if he'd make a political matter of his niece's love affairs, and that “By gad, Bertha, so long as he's got character, she can marry whoever she d——d pleases!” Still he was hopeful that she would prefer Thorne, while Mrs. Collett, pathetically helpless, could only look on and wait for the heavens to open and cast a random bolt in her favor. As for Catherine, she roamed in a world of dream so entirely and unmistakably happy that even Jimsey began to have his doubts and wondered if Butternut was “wu'th all that now.” He would have rushed over to Circle-B to congratulate his friend, but now that the Lambkin's road seemed fairly

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clear he was a little shy about treading holy ground.

In the evening, a few weeks later, Catherine was riding home from the post-office when she was overtaken by a gentleman on horseback.

"A wonderful twilight," he said softly, for she was absorbed in following the vanished sun into the west.

"That from you, Richard! I am surprised. You are surely not turning poetical?"

"Not poetical, but desperate. It's so confounded lonesome down here that you've got to take an interest in something or dry up. So, in the absence of anything else, I've taken to twilight."

She laughed right merrily, which made him feel comfortable by bringing him a certain amount of confidence. There wasn't much in this Jones escapade, after all! She had merely gone to the comfort of the old woman, and what could be more natural than that one of the cowboys should have accompanied her home?

"Did you see Mr. Ardell?" Catherine

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asked, having nothing of more interest on her tongue.

“Yes, but it was a fool’s errand, as far as our anxiety for the Berrys was concerned. He bought their place the very day I went over. Your friend Jones seems to have been a trifle mistaken in him.”

He bent a little nearer, and naturally connected her smile with his last remark, which pleased him. He could not know that she was thinking of the Lambkin’s significant words: “We’ll probably persuade him to buy it.” Verily had he been a wise prophet.

“I say, Kit,” said Thorne, cheerfully pleading, “when are you going to get out of this? Are you never coming back to the city? Do you know it’s September, and that the season will soon be wide open? You haven’t forgot the hops at the Fairchilds’, the suppers at Le Clede’s, nor the frisky Mrs. Travers with the freckles and giggle? My, but don’t she lead old Travers a pace! His jealousy’s worse than a comic opera, but I’m blowed if I’d want her flirting with *me*! You’re not forgetting the old life, Kit?”

She could only look in pity at this man

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whom money had spoiled. Her experience of the life he described was narrowed to a few desolate days, but he made it his world. Not an unprepossessing fellow, either, was Dick Thorne.

“Don’t you think the twilight is better, Richard?” she asked.

Then he began to understand, and to curse himself for having forgotten the art of tact. For the rest of the way he adapted his discourse to the soft demands of the surroundings and a maiden who might be in love, and he did it so successfully that by the time they reached Twin Bar she thought better of him.

Mr. Ramsgate found such a satisfaction in the arrival of his niece with Thorne that he welcomed that gentleman much as a father might welcome a favored son, while Mrs. Collett’s manner was pathetically fervent. Catherine was again their beloved niece, set on a pinnacle of affection. After supper Mr. Ramsgate was obliged to get rid of some of his gaiety by a demonstration.

“Let’s go over to Jimsey’s quarters and see the frolic,” he said.

Some of the cowboys were to start on the

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round-up to-morrow, and were having a sort of preliminary “blow-out,” which was also in honor of some friends who had happened in from the up-country. All the hands and servants had been invited to “step in if they felt feverish.” Catherine was quite ready to help along the fun, and Thorne preferred it to conversation, for his rôle of discreet friend was hard to keep up, and he was every moment perilously near a second fall.

Things were very gay at Jimsey’s. One of the hands had tuned up an old fiddle and was sawing ecstatically, while Buckboard Sam executed a jig with astounding vigor and wonderful suppleness. Little Jimsey imitated him in the rear, to the delight of his admiring parents, and from all quarters approbation sounded. There was one guest, Reddy Tums, from the Allobar country, who had evidently been too liberally supplied with “fire drops,” for Jimsey made fruitless efforts to quiet him down to the pitch of decorum supposed to be due in the presence of the family from “the house.” This noisy reveler grew silent a moment watching Catherine, who was in the midst of a game, while

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she looked the incarnation of youth and joy. Then he broke out, determined to be heard:

“ I say, I know a lady when I see her! ”
He jerked his head toward Catherine with an energy that would have toppled him to the floor but for the timely help of a neighbor.

“ Stand up here! ” whispered the neighbor, “ and screw your durned mouth shet! Don’t ye see—— ”

“ Yes-sir-ee, I *do* see! I see the purtiest lady thet I ever set eyes on ’ceptin’ one, an’ she wa’n’t no lady! Whip’ll, she was. Ever hye’rd o’ her? Bust my guns if she wasn’t a peach! You ought to ’a’ seen her the night she stood up with the Butternut an’ got married! I had a hand in thet little biz’ness—as neat a biz’ness as ye ever saw done! ”

“ Shet up, you rascal! ” shouted Jimsey, “ and don’t tell lies on your betters! ”

This blunder of Jimsey’s opened every ear in the room to the drunken cowboy’s story.

“ Betters, says he! Betters! Hear him, gem’en! Butternut Jones my betters! We was pards, I tell ye, over ’t the Sable Serpent,

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an' if ye come with me over 't the Circle-B ye'll find out if he's my betters! He'll know me, he will! Reckon there wa'n't no weddin', eh? Reckon the Whip'will didn't rope him slicker'n Lariat Bill ever roped a mustang? Had a preacher all honest, an' a Bible in his hand, an' 'My dearly beloved,' says he, an' had 'em tied in a minute till the devil couldn't bite the knot! The Butternut an' the Whip'will! By gracious, but she was purty that night, an' the Shuffler, he so mad he could 'a' bit nails till the Whip'will told him marriage needn't make no difference in *ther* relations, an' the Butternut, he——”

Here Jimsey took the narrator by the throat and backed him into a side room, where a muffled altercation ensued. Then Reddy seemed to be loose, and was heard to shout, “Shoot me dead if I ain't tellin' the livin' truth!” Catherine looked cold as lead, and was certainly shivering.

“Let us go, my love,” said Mrs. Collett.
“It is rougher than we expected.”

Back in the sitting-room Catherine's face was a white mask.

“She has a chill,” cried Mrs. Collett; “I

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must get a hot tea. John, I want to speak to you," she called frantically, flying out.

"What a terrible lie!" said Catherine, as her uncle followed her aunt, appealing to Thorne with a look that set him glowing. She was turning to him, the old friend, for hope in her despair. Such suffering would have softened him, for she was a moan of pain from head to foot; but the thought that it was for another man made his pity pitiless.

"Catherine," he said, taking her hand, which she at once withdrew. He was a little pale, for he felt that it was *his* critical moment. Now, above all times, must he conduct himself with tact. "I will go to him to-night; I will learn the truth from him——"

"Not to-night," said a slow voice. "You won't find him to-night."

At the window behind him, which opened on the veranda, stood Slow Mose, or the "Turtle," from the Circle-B, a cowboy in movement so habitually slow as to impart to him always a ludicrous air of profundity. Accident had given this man a vicious right eye, the kick of a colt having scarred the brow into an expression of menace, which,

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however, the rest of his affable face belied. After trying a whirl at Jimsey's and assisting the foreman in quieting the noisy citizen from Allobar, he had followed Captain Kitty to the house, for he had a message for her.

“Butternut Jones ain't been hye'rd of fer five days, ma'am. He's quit the country clean, an' the only word he left as I knows of was to bring his dawg to you. Do ye want him inside, ma'am? I've got him tied.”

He was *gone*. Damning corroboration!

“Go away!” cried Catherine, and the Turtle vanished.

“A lie! A terrible lie!” she repeated.

“I will go to that place,” said Thorne. “The man will tell me the way, or, if he won't, I will find it, and whatever the truth I will bring it to you.”

He bowed with great gallantry, but she was too chilled to notice him. For now there had gone cold to her pulseless heart the thought that while she had known instinctively that a certain man had loved her, the knowledge was wholly instinctive. Through all their hours together he had talked of mountains and rivers and books, and had told

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her many a quaint and humorous legend, but never by word or gesture had he spoken of love. His lane of opportunity had been wide, but from end to end had he kept a silent, sleepless guard upon his lips—and *this* was why. Men sometimes do not ask the women they love to marry them, but it is from pride, never from humility—the fear to risk a fall, not the fear that they deserve one. Butternut had been neither proud nor humble. He had been speechless before the impossible.

Catherine went wearily to her room, and received her aunt's ministrations in bed. Even Mrs. Collett was awed into unselfishness by the sight of her niece's face, and Catherine felt that after all her aunt had been right—that she would have saved her. So their good-night speech was the sincerest they had known for some time.

"Tell uncle good night," said Catherine, in a tone that meant utter capitulation to the world as she found it—utter letting go of the world as she dreamed it. Then, left alone, her thoughts played havoc with her throbbing head until mental exhaustion at last brought relief in blessed unconsciousness.

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Dick Thorne found it unnecessary to visit the preacher of Whitewater. Jimsey, long before the gentleman of fashion had finished his breakfast, had completed half the journey, and the man from Allobar was with him. The miserable foreman, as he rode, could only lift his voice in a kind of wail, “Lambkin, Lambkin, you wasn’t such a fool!”

But when he returned, late in the afternoon, the sight of his drawn face left all speech superfluous. Catherine, putting her hands to her burning cheeks, fled to her room, where for a time, as she tried to understand, she could get no further than a dumb stare into the impenetrable wall of fact—she had loved a man and he was married. But was that all? No. She might have endured that, but the destruction of her ideal denied her even the blessed balm of forgiving Butternut. Gladly, gratefully would she have done so had he merely married a wicked woman—men frequently do that—but a dance-hall favorite!—*a bar-room wench!*

Was it unnatural that Catherine, after many aching days, should grow a little hard-

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ened and strive to put her dreams behind her? Was it not also to be expected that she should turn to the person who, being nearest her kind at this time, could most interest her—the old friend of other days—Dick Thorne? and that he, with the tact of a man of the world, should keep his interests in the background and express nothing by gesture or tongue save sympathy?

Regardless of our woes we are obliged to live, and with youth especially is it a sorry game to live alone.

CHAPTER XVI

OKLAHOMA

SEPTEMBER FIFTEENTH, Ninety-three—
Oklahoma!

Again, after a sleep of four years, had the magic word flown broadcast to every quarter and encamped an army of maniacs on the borders of the enchanted land. The Cherokee Strip on the morrow would be open for settlement, its choicest acres as free as air to the man or woman who could get them first.

Billy, the tenderfoot, spent the night kicking at his blankets. With their diabolical folds some part of his body seemed always at war. At intervals his hand explored the ground to remove a lump of wondrous size driven indelicately into his person, but generally his woes were with the blankets. They behaved always in the manner of assailants. They smothered him in clammy embrace,

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which is the way of all bedding on a sultry night, and the rain of other days had bequeathed to them the smell of old leather.

However, his chief cause for unrest bore from another quarter. From the level above him, back of the creek woods, signs of high excitement reached him in a volley of demoniacal sound. Cries deep and mighty, to the chorus of battering hoofs, had for hours sawed the night; there throbbed on the plain a wild, hoarse throng whose voice had the composite quality of a clamor, a roar, and a chant. Born at a point miles distant, it swept nearer with speed, and, climbing in volume, smote the timber in a long, screaming crash.

The resolute grumble of the road-wagons was first in prominence, and might have been heard across the breadth of the "divide," while the shrill stock-whips spoke blatantly and trace-chains jangled in strong under-song. Frequently in the distance occurred a collision, with the noise of bones a-tumble, followed by a stream of miraculous oaths, and the tenderfoot gathered that teamsters were abusing each other in the dark. One

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man, riding at a gallop by the edge of the cañon, made malicious reference to another man. A shambling wagon at periods, shrieking insanely, proclaimed that it suffered for grease, and between the voicings of its complaint droned a softer crinking noise, the whip-whish sound of leather on leather. On occasion, too, could be discerned the rhythmic step of a trained column marching, and the whisper of shifting musketry, blended with bugle-like commands; and as these sounds were wrought upon the night, continually drummed the hoof-chorus.

The air bore the smell of a crowd at a circus. The dust of the plain rose lazily, bellying, as smoke bellies over a town of many mills, and at every point the chief thing to be felt was a quivering, vibrant beating, the resonant pulse of an uproar.

The tenderfoot, lost in the shadows, strove laboriously to distinguish objects, but the gloom of the cañon was around him and discernment halted at the elbow. Across the stream a flimsy, pale border marked the skyline, above which the tops of the creek woods groped in mystery at the clouds. These trees

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were so fantastic in shape that he whiled the time in ascribing to them various fanciful identities. Ghosts of childhood giants they might be, castles of romance, or crags and peaks of legends, and finally it was probable that they were merely the vapping dust curling up from the plain.

Ultimately, across the divide, came the dawn curtainwise, and flung a violet light over the landscape. At once the mysterious cloaked objects of the cañon began to introduce themselves. Trees loomed gray, like steeples in a fog. Two horses, tethered in the shrubbery close at hand, sidled like shadows into view.

The tenderfoot, rising with caution on an elbow, yawned prodigiously from extreme weariness. His inexperience at this sort of thing made him feel as if he had been hung on a fence or had lain for weeks on a woodpile. Standing and stretching to the limits of his frame, he began the day by remarking jocularly to the world:

“ I feel like a skeleton in reduced circumstances.”

His gaze swept with malice a curious

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jumble of blankets and humanity which lay by him in a wonderful sprawl, and from the depths of which a gentle and regular breathing rose comfortably. He seemed to take this evidence of tranquillity as little short of an insult.

“Sleepin’ like the angels. Hi, you! *Get up!*”

There was a labored movement of the jumble, and as the tenderfoot swung an impending boot there gathered a shape which rose specter-like. It evolved swiftly into a tall, elastic youth, of fine-cut features and slender of limb, but withal a certain fulness of figure that averted any conclusion of fragileness. His pantaloons were of corduroy, blousing at the boot-tops and encircled at the waist by a leathern belt on which appeared a number of Indian designs in colored beads and threads, and at his soft shirt-collar there dangled in a loose knot a clean polka-dot tie.

After a quick glance from left to right he turned an eye of reproach on his companion, and spoke in a quiet drawl:

“You are makin’ a lot o’ noise, William. Is it a stampede, or a storm?”

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The tenderfoot seemed to gather additional offense from these words, and accordingly descended upon him with a whoop of challenge, whereat it appeared that the other was in no way to be surprised, for he retained his balance with amazing ease and dexterously enfolded his assailant.

"Jones, can you see the creek?"

"William, my eyes are good."

"Well, I'm goin' to put you in."

"You don't say!"

There followed a terrific lifting of the gravel, the crashing of sticks and brush from the havoc of their heels. Winding warily, with numerous twists, wrenches, and whirls, they steered about, each with the other encircled, until often as they wheeled the pivot was a single limb. One had been famous at Cambridge for his way of conveying an inflated ball through a wall of armored muscle, but the other had followed bulls over plain and through chaparral in all kinds of weather. The tenderfoot knew many tricks of the college game, and he tried them here, but it was useless. His slim adversary had the curves of a weasel and was quite as slippery.

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Presently in one spot the wrestlers became established, as rigid as trees. In no direction, and by no maneuver, it seemed, could either be impelled from his ground; but finally, after some moments of this tension, the tenderfoot, with the other's forearm like a stone under his chin and a steel-like pressure on his spine, was forced slowly and gently upon his back.

The Lambkin, at once breaking away, made a gesture in which he feigned a wide measure of contempt.

"Now, if I were a suckling ca'af, say two days old, with wobbly legs, and a stiff wind was in your favor, you might stand a show. You're young yet, William. You oughtn't have ventured West till you were grown up."

He wheeled blithely and strode along the stream toward the horses. They whinnied gleefully on his approach. One of them he smote admiringly in the flank, vowing that he was a spanking steed, and the animal in acknowledgment bit playfully at his shoulder. Gathering their halters in hand, he went between them to the creek, and stood whistling while they drank.

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Meanwhile the tenderfoot was exploring the depths of a pair of provision bags which swung from a convenient sapling. A rectangular chunk of raw bacon he first brought to light, viewing it dubiously at arm's length and mentally numbering its future days. A loaf of camp bread, of doubtful complexion and hard as a gourd, he next resurrected, weighing this also at a distance, with a casual tribute to its suitability for other purposes. He then gathered some dead branches, and with the aid of a newspaper started a blaze, after which, filling the coffee-pail with water from the creek, he resolutely armed himself with a frying-pan. From time to time during these proceedings he paused to cast an uneasy eye toward the sounds upon the plain.

The Lambkin returned to camp whistling a melancholy air which he could not exactly recall. His gait was loose and unintentional. He had the confident swagger of a person in his own township. Halting by the breakfast fire, his head aslant and eyes asquint to evade the smoke, he viewed approvingly the savory preparations. The tenderfoot, flushed and

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ravenous, was forking the meat brown side skyward.

"William," said the Lambkin, admiringly, "you make a reasonably fair cook. Salt me if you're not handier at flippin' bacon than at wrestlin'."

Billy, while he had faith in his power to come off resplendent in a second bout, disdained the challenge. It may be that the approaching repast, which he regarded as more or less of a concoction, was something he was anxious to dispose of. Presently setting the sizzling frying-pan to one side, he remarked with great gravity that breakfast was now ready in the dining-car. They at once laid violent hands on the victuals, and as they breakfasted and their conversation flowed, it was plain that theirs was not a passing acquaintance.

Down at Fort Worth they had met casually, the West and the East. Later, by Guthrie, West had guided East in the purchase of a horse. Billy had early confided to his guide that he had but a hundred and fifty dollars, and asked the best way to invest it, whereupon the Lambkin, after a little figur-

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ing, had advised him to put a hundred and forty-five of it in a horse.

"Ponies are cheap," said Billy.

"But hawses are high, William. You want a steed that can run. A Kentucky racer or a thoroughbred from Ohio won't be any too swift for you, I reckon. They've got 'em here by the car-loads, to rent or buy."

In securing Billy a steed, as well as one for his own use, Butternut had been both fortunate and wise. He had become a fair judge of horses, and in addition to this knowledge, among the dealers at the market had run upon a burly man he had known in Texas, and who greeted him with love in his eye.

"Lambkin, you're the one person in the world I wouldn't swindle to-day. Here's old Roan Rebel, one o' the fastest nags that ever wore a girth, an' that sorrel with a bald face is his cousin. I'll lend 'em to you fer fifty apiece, an' if ye let anything *pass* you, skin me if I don't hev ye shot."

So instead of buying second-rate steeds with their limited funds, they had hired animals of quality; and thus, properly mounted,

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Billy and his guide had journeyed to the border-line.

"We'll run for what's goin' to be the town of Perry, William," the Lambkin had advised, "only ten miles from the line. It's the county-seat, and if we land anywhere close to the town, I reckon we ought to be rich in a year."

By the time they had now finished their repast the sun had lifted on the plain, and the tops of the trees in the hollow were tintured with the hue of pale orange. A small leaf, fluttering occasionally in the foliage, shone with the glitter of new metal.

Suddenly Billy, bending intently nearer the Lambkin, referred to the question of highest importance to their minds:

"I say, Jones, when's she goin' to come off?"

Apparently the allusion was to something which was going to happen on the plain, for Butternut's throat swelled with feeling as his quick glance upward studied keenly the summit of the bank. To the clangorous din on the plain there had been no interruption. With insane persistence the voices of the wild

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tongues clashed on the air—unceasing information of the presence of a throng. Once there was a lull as a number of factors in the tumult paused in miraculous unison, but the half-silence seemed a thing more tremendous than the highest point of the clamor. Wagons, their axles grinding, continued to screech expostulation. High on the morning air the vibrant note of the trace-chains jangled always like a song.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LONG, GRIM LINE

SAID the Lambkin, as he gestured carelessly toward the uproar:

"Twelve o'clock, William, is when the entertainment's due to begin, and I'm thinkin' we'll be fully informed o' the hour. There'll be quite a lively little rumpus, I judge."

It was a way of the Lambkin to put all things modestly.

Their preparations told of coming great action. While Billy gathered and returned to the bags the breakfast hardware, the Lambkin again swung along the bank, and presently brought the horses into camp. With a dexterity and ease bespeaking long practise he buckled the blankets into rolls and girded upon each animal a saddle and pack. To each of his boot-heels he then fastened a steel-plated spur, polished and glittering, and

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finally from a branch above him dislodged a lopping white sombrero which, adjusted, left him complete. From scalp to heels he was a cowboy. As for Billy, while he had contrived to provide himself with spurs, there was little else about him in keeping with his comrade. The Lambkin, however, regarded him always with a show of pride.

Taking each a bridle, they preceded their steeds up the slanting bank, a winding cow-path guiding them to the summit. Immediately they found themselves at one end of a column of horses and wagons which stretched off to the west interminably. A low hill stood at the distance of a mile and a taller one appeared beyond, yet over the crest of each appeared a receding section of this line. Clearly it had but one end.

The tenderfoot cast an amazed eye along the heads of the horses, straight and even as a line of prize cavalry on review. The sounds of high uproar which had reached him through the night had not prepared him for so orderly a spectacle. However, he was looking only at the front of the column. The southward side or rear presented a scene

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to be contemplated with distended jaw—a panorama of confusion, screaming, chaotic—a bawling sea of barbarians wild with one desire; a commotion gigantic that seemed to be drowning the world with noise. In all directions steered vehicles in careening, reckless fashion, with no law as to movement, but with the behavior of straws in a gale. Horsemen wheeling riotously in circles met horsemen who sped in direct lines, and there was trouble. Yells were everywhere, and at times the plain might have trembled. The short autumn grass, hammered to shreds by the hoofs and beaten into the earth, left free the dust which rose in banks. A cavalcade of cowboys appeared where it was thickest, their leader singing, while lean-faced women peered at them from the depths of the restless wagons.

A man on a saffron mule went amid the throng shouting. Dust lay in stripes on his face. He wore a drab linen ulster and with an enormous figured handkerchief occasionally sponged his brow. He was an elderly man, with a little, sharp chin, and of insignificant stature, but his mule was something

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colossal, and, bearing him on high through the crowd, invested him with a prominence he could have never otherwise attained. He shouted always in a blaring voice of tin, while he rode nonchalantly here and there with a simple anxiety to be where the commotion was greatest. In these proceedings he had the idle, pleasurable interest of a man at a country fair.

On every hand were to be seen all types of men. At the back of the line a company of blue infantry at rest on a knoll viewed the tumult with languor. To Billy their presence explained the martial sounds he had distinguished at periods of the night, though it was now plain that they found little of interest in the doings of this mad throng. Their part in the day's arrangements having ceased with the orderly formation of the long forward line—in which they had been assisted by cavalrymen in front—their present business was merely to await the time when chance emergency might bring them into action. Accordingly on the knoll they occupied idle positions and joked at the multitude.

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Behind them, on the crest of the hill, stood a bent and bearded man in deerskins and moccasins. A disconsolate hound whined at his feet. Occasionally, in a dry, mirthless way, the exiled trapper would join in the laugh of the blue soldiers, then, looking again at the yelling crowd, would remark to the hound that this was a great day. A vagabond Indian, in the castaway pantaloons of an infantryman and bearing a pipe shaped like a tomahawk, made periodical quests for tobacco. A gambler in hard luck labored with infinite craft to bring a cowboy to the mood of exchanging his bronco for a bad watch—a task which was hopeless to the point of pathos, for it required a fortune to here buy a horse, and fortunes were rare in this crowd. It happened, paradoxically, that a man in a saddle was a millionaire.

Somewhere in the throng a monotonous man with a dilapidated drum—relic of a stranded circus—thumped it continually with the automatic persistence of a hired man. About him was a certain pomp, a blaze of glory, born of his triumph in contributing to the tumult a new kind of sound.

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Billy turned an appealing eye on the Lambkin.

"Lively crowd, Jones?"

"Yes," said his comrade, bending close that he might impart a lesser pitch to his voice, "they do seem to be sorter active. But I judge they won't really kick up a fuss till they get the order to move. Then'll come the dance."

"Do you think we can hold our colors?"

"I think we can, William. Our hawses are fresh and as good as any in the bunch, and after the first hundred yards there'll be plenty o' room in front. Some o' those mavericks in line that think they've got the whole prairie grabbed and staked are goin' to go lame when the show begins."

Billy surveyed again the prodigious front line which impressed him as a thing of sinister propensities. He observed that the men in the wagons enjoyed the better view, their spring seats lifting them slightly above the horsemen. In consequence they frequently sighted a comrade in the crowd who responded with his eye, and they flung conversation spirally over the heads that intervened.

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Billy noticed that the tone of these remarks varied with the position of the comrade. If in the forward line he was considerably admired, but if in the tangled ranks to the rear he very much resembled a terrapin or caterpillar, and there were numerous occupations that better befitted him. It was "Hullo, Steve! Glad to see ye head hawg!" or "Pete! Go home 'n' feed yer cows!" as the case might be.

It was also apparent that this event had been the means of assembling a number of weather philosophers. Frequently an elderly oracle, gesticulating with his beard, would remark that he apprehended rain. At intervals a problem in humor traveled by stages down the line, and once the man on a saffron mule sang, dolorously:

"Ears supreme and legs *dee-vine*,
My Moll mule is a *he-ro-ine*."

'Always in the air was a bowstring vibration. Billy noticed, too, that there was a woman or two in the line.

It occurred to the Lambkin presently to advise the tenderfoot with reference to their

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behavior when the time for action should arrive.

"You'll notice, William," said he, "that we are penned in here like prize shoats by these wagons, so the thing to do'll be to crowd their hind wheels till there's a gap, then swing through and——"

"Steer north?"

"Yes; north till we hit the old Hutton Trail, by the Lone Cottonwood, then westwards along the edge o' the black-jacks, then straight through the timber for half a mile, strikin' the open by Dry Creek, and from there over the jumpin' plains——"

His friend of the horse-market had given Butternut directions, had even provided him with a chart of the country, which the wily Lambkin had studied until copied indelibly on his brain.

"Slow up, Jones!" cried the tenderfoot. "Can't follow you!"

"You'll *have* to, William, when the dance begins—to the flower land o' Oklahoma! Only ten miles, and we must get there first—you hear me, William—we must *get there!*"

Billy resolved privately that if necessary

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he would leap over rivers, uproot a forest, surmount any obstacle in order to "get there." The fever of the "boomer" was upon him. He became a part of the mad, clamoring throng.

As for the Lambkin, while he was enthusiastic, he showed little excitement, although as his gaze swept the north with calmness, he squirmed a little restlessly in the stirrups.

A cavalry corporal on an iron-gray horse rode up and down the front of the line. His gauntleted right hand held a bugle which glittered in the sun as from time to time he waved it like a menacing wand at the multitude. A blast from this instrument was to be the official signal of the opening, and as time sped, the gaze of every person whose position permitted became glued to this corporal. So general and intense was the interest he produced that it softened the rampant ardor of some of the boomers. They no longer yelled, nor sought to shoulder each other from the landscape. It required an agile man to keep an alert eye on the cavalryman and attend to the aggressiveness of a neighbor at the same time.

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At one minute to twelve the hand with the bugle was resting quietly on the corporal's thigh. As the seconds wore along the breath of an impending crisis seemed to fill the air like a substance, and the tongues of the men in the forward line were suddenly paralyzed. They who had earlier conversed with the freedom of old acquaintances and discussed the relative superiority of some brands of tobacco now sat woodenly, friendless. Southward, along the creek, the trees of cottonwood and mesquit seemed intent spectators. A venerable buzzard from the brow of a snag was solemnly contemplative. He signaled a brother, a hoary patriarch, and they compared notes.

To Billy there was something overmastering and suffocating in the suspense—a power which seemed to grapple his throat with sinister fingers—as over five thousand hungry, intent eyes awaited the next move of this gauntleted hand. It seemed incredible that this orderly, even line was to suddenly become a frenzied thing, a reaching, spreading monster, filling the land with its bluster and blare, merely because a certain man should raise and blow a bugle.

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“ William! ”

“ Well, Jones? ”

“ What d’you s’pose would happen if that cavalryman should take a fool notion to *twist his mustache?* ”

“ Jerusalem! They’d steal a march on Uncle Sam! ”

“ I reckon they would— Get ready, William.”

The cavalryman had turned the head of his gray northward, and was gathering up his reins. There was a hum of restlessness on every hand and in the air a feeling of grim impatience. Huge, perspiring palms were rubbed upon overalls. There was a sputtering stream of laments. One man, rising on his spring seat, flung rasping abuse at the horizon. Another appealed complainingly to space: “ Why don’t he blow? ’Pears to me he’s blamed slow! ”

On the instant the corporal sent a roving eye down the line on either side, then, lifting the gauntleted hand deliberately, blew a single blast.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE BLAST OF A BUGLE

WHEREAT, with a suddenness spasmodic and a degree of ferocity not to be touched upon in language, the multitude here assembled swept northward. There occurred, miles in width, an avalanche of horses, vehicles, and men, with the noise and motion of innumerable mad monsters. A commotion colossal that, distending, filled the horizon. A reaching wave of humanity, inflamed to demoniacal frenzy. The earth rang with countless thuds and the air was thick with yells which must have reached to the remotest borders of the plain. The jangle of "traces" and brass-keyed cries of the men rose to the din of a tin-pan brigade, the banshee shriek of battle-hordes, a world of pandemonium. The rattle of wheels and batter of hoofs on the sod spread broadwise in a hurricane of sound.

Afterward in Billy's memory the thing

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which lived most vividly was his fleeting view of an iron-gray horse leaping through the air at the instant his own steed lunged, and Butternut, bending, yelled him advice:

“Through the gap, William! Dead ahead! *Ride!*”

The final injunction was whirled from the highest point of the Lambkin's lung-power, and Billy knew that there was no mistaking it—he must ride. Not at a comfortable canter, or a lope, or even at a gallop, but as the cowboy meant it—at a pace which would bring his steed's ears and tail to a level and carom him over the slopes bullet-like—at a speed which would cause him to divide the air so swiftly that he would feel himself becoming smaller and be amazed. But Billy was game to the heels. He could not, of course, ride like the Lambkin, as if he were part of his horse, but he could at least stay in the saddle, and the bald-faced sorrel needed no spur. So with a wild, challenging cry he squeezed close until his boot rubbed the cowboy's, and thus they rode.

The swooping throng was at once scattered wide by the varying fleetness of the

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horses, and there were instances of surprising speed from quarters previously unrecognized. Some of the riders who had hitherto figured as the subjects of facetious comment because of their unpromising mounts now showed triumphantly at the front. A certain selfish man would be approaching a point of vantage, his face ashine with pride in the superiority of his steed, when a lamb-eyed, unpretentious beast, which had earlier in no way indicated his qualities, would pass him with a blithe, elastic stride. And the vanquished rider, amazed and distressed, would turn to see if others of this class were in sight. Later he would become filled with immeasurable contempt for the quality of his own steed and swear profoundly at him.

Among the horsemen who thus astonished beholders was the man in a drab ulster, whose angular mule thrust the plain behind him with swift, miraculous gestures. The ease with which this animal led the race amounted to sarcasm. He seemed to gather a mile of landscape in about the same period required for a man to raise his voice.

Billy and the Lambkin rode always

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abreast. Their horses, matched in speed, went neck to neck, and the prairie flowed under them, a limitless gray-green sea. Northward for a mile they ran, until in a long sag of the plain they came upon a lone cottonwood — the Lambkin's first landmark — by which ran a trail westward. Furrowed and worn from the travel of years was this trail, and hoofs having struck it just before them, they crossed in a world of yellow dust. Beyond, they steered at an angle, slowing with steady rein as the prairie, like a thing that is tired, rolled in waves toward the black-jack woods.

“Easy, William,” breathed the Lambkin, in a voice full of dust; “she’s jolty now to the timber.”

Billy offered no response. Already he had little breath for needless conversation. With a feverish eye on the bobbing head of a horseman some yards in advance he rode oblivious. His entire interest in life seemed fastened upon this rider, until Butternut gave him a swift, uneasy glance, then took his big hat and swung it viciously before the other's face.

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"Softly, William, or you'll be gettin' the 'glaze,'" he wheezed.

Another mile they rode, rising on the knolls and sinking in the hollows with a rhythmic, cradle-like motion.

"What is the 'glaze,' Jones?"

"It's a sort o' stupor that sometimes catches a man new to the saddle from ridin' too long at one tension. Makes him dizzy and likely to tumble, and loses his head so't he don't care if he does. Don't get excited, is the safest plan."

They had reached the timber stretch and were careering along the edge of it. The prairie to their right and behind them was still dotted with riders, but the Lambkin gave them no heed. He directed his attention wholly to the woods, casting from time to time a calculating eye through the trees. Presently he gave utterance to a gleeful yell.

"That tall tree yonder, William, on the edge o' the strip, is where we turn in. I was beginnin' to fear our chart had lied. There's a cow-path through the belt, and by takin' it we'll gain a quarter."

On the instant they wheeled and went

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recklessly at the woods, bending low among the branches, which smote them like claws and threatened to dislodge them from their horses. Their pace here was of necessity a walk, and their way was beset with difficulties, but desperately, gallantly, they threshed forward. The timber-belt was scarcely half a mile in width, but to Billy it had all the dimensions of a jungle. Eventually, however, after what seemed to him an interminable battle with the brush, they emerged again into the white light of the plain and wheeled tranquilly northward.

Behind them, as before, came a persistent, courageous band, but it was now a thin, straggling column stretching rearward for a mile. It was apparent that this section of the flying line had met with some obstacle—an inopportune cañon or unexpected timber-strip, and this was the difficulty which Butternut's familiarity with the landscape had enabled him to avoid.

In consequence of the advantage now gained Billy and the Lambkin discovered presently that they were leading the race, and they grew tremendously elated. Their feel-

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ings even left them of a mind for idle conversation. Butternut, turning casually in the saddle, made careless reference to the rider nearest them.

"She rides handsome, but she's plum played out, and I'm afraid she's killin' her hawss——"

Billy went erect as a spike.

"A woman!" he cried. He wheeled his glance to the rear, to discover the folds of a gray skirt blowing on the wind, and a slender boot in a narrow stirrup. A moment his gaze comprehended nothing more, but directly he observed the full, graceful figure of the rider. She was a young woman, and as she leaned lithely over the neck of her mount he saw that her face was round and fair to look upon. Her head was bare of all covering, a large cattleman's hat swinging by a string from her throat. There was a look of wild hunger, of despairing eagerness in her face, though her eyes, expressionless, were as if stone blind.

"God!" cried Billy. He whirled furiously on the cowboy. "She's falling! She'll drop in the next mile!"

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The Lambkin's response, save in volume, was a drawl:

"William, I reckon she will; but it would hurt her feelin's to stop her. Maybe she'll have the sense to halt——"

Abruptly an appalling change came over him. One swift instant his look was that of a man whose throat is caressed by an apparition—the pallor of him rivaling the death-white on the face of the woman—then settled again, serene, implacable. Bringing his glance forward he bestowed unswerving attention on a dim line of timber that curved indefinitely into the northwest.

Billy thereafter found himself impetuously hurling prophecies at an entirely feelingless object. His references to the woman might with the same efficacy have been addressed to a tree, to a hill, or to space. He grew stupefied at this utter defiance of tradition, this sovereign contempt for an opportunity for gallantry, unprecedented even in romance. Here was an insult to the teachings of his childhood, a brutal violation of all lovely legends. Thrice he wheeled his gaze about and, meeting the glaze of the fair

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rider's eyes, underwent a spasm of distress. The spectacle commanded the entire respect of his mind, grasping vise-like the sympathies of his humane instincts. He whirled another ferocious look at Butternut, whose gaze still studied the crawling line of timber.

“ If I'd any doubt of her bein' down——”

The cowboy uttered a shrill, wild yell, as a man who throws aside a large amount of forbearance. Sweeping out a dexterous arm he seized the tenderfoot's shoulder, and, bending, screamed with an oath into the teeth of the other:

“ Button your wind and your chickenness! Don't be a damned fool!”

CHAPTER XIX

BILLY IS GALLANT

WITH his second backward glance the Lambkin had recognized the Whippoorwill. But he had become hardened. Long and repeated days of bitterness seemed finally to have incased his bleeding heart in a shell, just as flesh long persecuted becomes insensible to pain. This piteous depth of his misery could not have been better shown than by the fact that he now, though at first disposed to adopt a harsh mood toward the tenderfoot, discovered eventually, in the light of his experience, a certain ironical humor in the latter's behavior. Men frequently laugh loudest when most desperate, so the Lambkin began to offer advice to Billy in the tones of one who has a tremendous joke in mind.

"Come to think of it, William, you *had* better halt her right off. It'll be kind of a

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shame to lose your lead, but you'll get your reward. I'll gamble she hasn't forgot how to smile, and nobody could ask more'n that!"

Billy was inclined to seize him and make a strong effort to sweep him from the saddle.

"You *know* her?"

"Aw, yes." The Lambkin made an eloquent flourish toward the south. "We are quite old friends. Met her down in Texas, at a 'function' in the city o' Whitewater. She was queen o' the occasion—the fairy o' the flock." His voice had the tone of foul medicine as he thought of a Girl from Missouri, "They called her the Whip'll down there, and there was a fiddle and plenty o' whisky where she held forth."

"Well?"

"*Well!* There was plenty o' whisky there, I said, and to see the inside would in no way remind you of a church. There was a right active bar at one end, and at the other a stage where she used to dazzle the boys from over the range when she sang Annie Laurie and The Last Rose o' Summer. But I reckon she was better at dancin'."

Now here was something which, to But-

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ternut's mind, ought to have staggered a stone, but which Billy accepted with no visible distress. On the contrary, he showed a supreme and frozen indifference, an imbecile heedlessness, the profound calm of a man who hears the details of juvenile campaigns. The Lambkin viewed him in a stupor, helpless, petrified, for he was now posing on a moral pinnacle which probably he would never have achieved but for his experience with the Whippoorwill. This in accordance with the rule that when a woman shows a man that she has amused herself with him he inevitably becomes a figure of mangled purity, an outraged saint, while her character as infallibly assumes the hue of an African in a chimney.

"She wasn't always bad, I'll allow," pursued the senseless Billy. "May not have been her fault either. Stress of fortune and circumstances——"

The Lambkin threw his gaze to the clouds, overcome by this excruciating thrust. Vividly he recalled the numberless occasions when, debating with himself, he had used this same magnanimous argument.

Immediately he lost all inclination for

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further words with Billy, from whom he turned pityingly, but as at this instant there came a cry from the Whippoorwill, he impulsively glanced again in her direction. Her steed *was* swaying, certainly, but then she would doubtless land on her feet, for, he reflected, she was a woman of experience. Besides, had he not once gone out of his way for her with fearful results?

The tenderfoot's feelings, however, were different. Not having the Lambkin's point of view, he could afford to be more humane. He gave a shout to the Whippoorwill, and by a dexterous and quick wheel escaped the clutch of his comrade. He was even in time to catch the reins of the woman's mount, but was too late to avert the disaster. The staggering horse went sprawling on the plain, and his hapless rider was thrown bowling into a heap, limp and unconscious. Butternut, looking straight ahead, failed to observe the mishap. Immediately Billy was clear of the stirrups and bending over her, while the voice of the heedless cowboy reached him in a jumble of imprecation and song.

CHAPTER XX

“IF I WERE GOING TO BE HANGED!”

FOR a distance the Lambkin rode amid deep woe, swearing and larruping his legs in the stirrups. Billy had betrayed him. Billy had used his feelings in the shabbiest possible manner. Billy was worse than a criminal. The Lambkin's voice went out in a long groan. It was not unnatural that he should fail to see that even if, as he believed, the Whippoorwill was in no great danger, Billy had done a gallant thing—that the anguish he had endured because of this woman should so cloud his perception as to show him Billy merely as a copy of himself—an infatuated fool. He made desperate effort to discover a measure for the tenderfoot's offense, but was wofully inadequate to the task. The entire length and breadth of his experience failed to provide a precedent for this appalling crime. He could only gather in his mind a volley of deepest cal-

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umny and hurl it with ferocity at the innocent Billy. He then discovered it a relieving process to include all mankind in his denunciations. The sudden spectacle of the Whippoorwill, appearing in his wake like a forgotten ghost, had thrown him into a kind of frenzy. He had finally surrendered himself to the question of why individuals so pathetically helpless as Billy and himself were permitted at large, when a sudden obstruction in his path surprised him.

At the top of a rise he found himself on the point of colliding with a man in a drab ulster who, in the company of a saffron mule, had come to a halt at the foot of the slope beyond. Both were in an attitude of absolute rest, the man standing carelessly, his weight on one leg and a guarding hand on his steed's neck. Between the pair and Butternut the distance was scarcely ten yards, but the Lambkin had not the time to lift his voice before the tail of the ulster went like a curtain in the air, the graceless little legs beneath it spread and closed with the action of a patent clothes-pin, and man and beast went northward with stupefying velocity.

“IF I WERE TO BE HANGED”

“By the Jumpin’ Jack-rabbits!” gasped Butternut, as he swept over the spot they had occupied, and, looking after them, saw that he was being regarded humorously by the drab ulster, who now wafted off into song:

“Oh, some like a hoss hoof—a mule hoof is better ;
Give me my Moll’s hoof in all sorts o’ weather.”

The singer slowed his pace until Butternut was enabled to ride abreast of a little spare man, with a stubby, straw-colored beard and small, brown eyes that squinted merrily in all directions. His face was tanned to the tone of new leather, and his thin, long nose had the curve of a beak, the sides of which seemed to slope far back into the shadow of his cheeks. His hair was of a troubled gray, though he wore perpetually the smile of a clown. It was his wonderful steed, however, which drew most of the Lambkin’s attention. In deep amazement he contemplated the homely animal whose ungainly limbs were such a revelation.

“By the last hair of a tarant’ler, stranger, you’ve got a swift beast!”

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The ulster grinned more and more expansively, tilting the beak skyward, and finally exploded a sort of three-cornered cackle which exposed a staggering row of front teeth.

“By the virtue of ol’ Moll’s hoof, sonny, ye air kerreck! Thah’s nothin’ so speedy as thet same mare mule!” He lifted a proud hand and feelingly smote the brute’s neck. “She’s the winged witch o’ the prairies, is Moll, and ye kin taberlate thet on yer tombstone!”

At a rapid, regular pace they went, leaning now toward the northwest. From time to time a startled jack-rabbit leaped into view and raced for the woods, while periodically from the bunch-grass flashed the great grasshoppers with warlike rattle.

The Lambkin presently felt constrained to mention a part of his woes to his companion. The fellowship of two men with a common interest, galloping abreast for a certain time, impelled him to a kind of confidence. Besides, he felt no small desire to expose Billy, which, though a tame revenge, was the fiercest in his reach. Accordingly, as they

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sped over the next rise, he rode closer to the Moll mule.

“ I lost a mighty good pard in the shuffle,” he observed, carelessly.

“ Sho’! Ye don’t say!” The mule was the recipient of an affectionate blow in the flank. “ No kind of a hawss, hey? Sarved him right. Where’d ye leave him? ”

“ About a mile back, I judge; but he had a good hawss.”

The ulster’s curiosity here drew him erect in a manner quite satisfactory to the Lambkin.

“ Huh! What laid him out? ”

“ Petticoats!” cried the cowboy, bitterly; “ a song-and-dance favorite, and a maid of right lovely ways. She’s a capital judge o’ whisky and can ‘stock’ the cards with her eyes shut. Her hawss, you see, was played out, and he stopped to give her a lift. I reckon she’s got *his* hawss by this time.”

“ Yaas? That was powerful perlite.”

“ Oh, it was very fine, but she’ll give him trouble, for she’s a poison bad lot. She’ll make him love her for a sufferin’ angel before she gets through—but, by God!” he broke off piteously, for always in his heart

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was a Girl from Missouri, "*I* know her for a screechin' centipede!"

"Aw, now, me son—sof'ly! We don't want to be ha'ash. Mebbe it warn't so much her doin's. *Circumstances* could 'a' played a big hand——"

Butternut felt as if he had been struck a violent blow in the face. He uttered a groan in the despairing tone of one who has lost all faith in his kind, and at once swerved at a wide distance from the ulster, regarding him thereafter with monumental contempt. He became a forlorn horseman journeying hopelessly over the monotonous levels of the plain. Did *no one* have the sense to understand? He swore roundly at mankind, especially at Billy, more particularly at the Whippoorwill. For her his loathing was immeasurable, she being the foul germ to which all these ills, these agonies, could be traced. As her countless tricks and wiles flashed unclad before him, he wondered for the hundredth time why she had previously in no way impressed him as a strategist. Blind indeed must he have been, and above all was it piteously ironical to recall that her chief bat-

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tery had been pathos. As he had once assured McCormick, she was a “hummer” on pathos. If he had had doubting moments before, he was now certain that his regard for this woman was the same as he should feel for a slough of reptiles, a swarm of tarantulas. His thoughts upon her were beyond all speech, though a dim expression of them might be:

“—If I were going to be hanged, and were called upon to name the crowning pity of the world, it would be that some women are not born in their proper shape. Belonging to the creatures that crawl, yet they walk and smile as women, and so deceive man into thinking them of consequence, only to take him and delicately drown him in a sea of despair, of shame——”

Something of the tenor of this speech seemed beating in his head like an automatic hammer timed to the regular strokes of his horse's hoofs.

Eventually, in a feverish effort at diversion, he began giving a sort of attention to objects along the way. Once when an adventurous wolf rounded the base of a knoll

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to his left, he mechanically leveled his six-shooter in that direction. The action was so free from interest that he nonchalantly closed both eyes with the discharge of the weapon and rode onward without troubling to note the effect of the shot. From time to time, as the recollection of late events came over him, he would grind his teeth in deepest woe, and, gazing in a helpless way at space, breathe out appealingly:

“Oh, hell!”

And again the hammer in his head and the rhythmic hoof-strokes, saying:

“—If I were going to be hanged——”

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAMBKIN SEES HUMOR

THE tops of the cottonwoods swung in sympathy together above a winding tunnel of shadows. Here was a wilderness of green interlacing branches through which the stream of Moccasin flowed leisurely, with frequent and picturesque bend and turn.

Butternut, following an abandoned cattle-trail, rode briskly to the ford. Allowing his "blown" roan a single cautious swallow, he halted the animal to a sapling, and proceeded at once to select a site for his tent; for here was the section on which he chose to "stake his claim." However, as a half-drowned person loses the desire to keep afloat, so a horseman sorely jaded is slow to journey afoot. The Lambkin had proceeded not a dozen yards before his limbs became as uncertain of movement as those of a drowsy cub, and, tired and saddle-sore, he sat down to rest.

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Confusedly in his mind was the spectacle of mad horsemen sweeping the southward plain, while keen and distinct was his vision of the Whippoorwill and Billy. "William, William," he muttered, and his voice was hopeless. He thought but once of the drab ulster, who had left his company about half a mile back, his last remark to Butternut having been some indistinct reference to the virtues of the Moll mule.

After a short period of inaction the cowboy rose and resumed his detour, viewing the landmarks of the bottom as one who beholds a familiar locality; for the directions of the friend of the horse-market had been most minute. There was the old half-burned stump he had pointed out on his chart, over there by the blazed mesquit, and there, too, by the edge of the creek, lay the monstrous log he had mentioned, a great hollow extending from end to end and leaving it but a shell. This log had been especially impressed on the horse-dealer's mind because once on a hunt, when it had rained, he had crawled into it to escape the wet.

Butternut advanced and peered skeptic-

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ally into the mouth of the log. "He must have shrunk considerably to have got in there," he mused, whimsically. "I don't believe it would fit *me*." A sudden desire to settle the point smote him, and impulsively he thrust his entire body, feet foremost, into the hollow, and—there followed a period in which he deeply and tranquilly slept.

He was disturbed abruptly by a partial revolution of the log causing him to perform a like movement. He made a wild effort to support himself, but had barely recovered his balance before another spasmodic rolling threw him into his previous position. He was on the point of shouting when a heavy voice rose at one end of the log:

"I reckon it's a pious idee, 'Hicksy'!"

The remark was evidently in approval of a suggestion by another party, who now spoke at the opposite end:

"Bet it is, Bartle. It ain't the thing to erect a bang-up shanty 'n' thar'by draw s'picion. We don't want any spec'latin' es to how we found time to h'ist anything 'laborate."

The voices were a study in villainous

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accent. The retired Lambkin grinned in glee. Here was a situation in which he saw nothing but humor. The speech of the men had at once stamped them as "sooners,"* and it was also to be gathered from their language that the log was intended to serve as a factor in their dwelling, then in course of construction. The cowboy, however, had heard enough to understand that it would be a serious matter if he were discovered, and on the heels of this reflection came the remembrance that at a previous time that afternoon he had discharged a chamber of his six-shooter at a particularly unimportant and inoffensive wolf. It occurred to him now that no object could have been of less consequence than this animal, and at the same time the chamber in question reached a sudden high value in his mind. His hand instinctively sought his hip, but the movement was difficult owing to the limited room at his command and the log's revolutions requiring him to make a shielding brace of his elbows; however, by the play

* At the time of this event there were numerous persons who sought a short route to prosperity by evading the vigilantes and placing themselves across the line in advance of the legal date. Such parties were known as "sooners."

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of his forearms alone he succeeded in reaching the weapon and in replacing the wasted charge.

By the time this was accomplished the "sooners" had got the log into a locality satisfactory to them, and the cowboy thereafter enjoyed the luxury of having his attitude of repose undisturbed. He lay comfortably then on his stomach, and having brought his weapon forward, trained its muzzle carelessly on the mouth of the log. Through the round opening he saw that the approach of night was rapidly filling the bottom with shadows, and presently some crackling brush told him that the "sooners" had started a blaze. Doubtless this was with a view to preparing their evening meal, and again did the confident proceedings of the ruffians cause the Lambkin to smile. Soon the pleasing aroma of steaming coffee was floating in to him. The fire was burning a few yards from the end of the log, at a point almost in line with his vision, and as the flames brightened with the darkness, their light flickered along the interior of his retreat to within three inches of his arm. By twisting his head as far to one

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side as his narrow quarters would permit he could include a section of the fire in his view, and was enabled to see a fragmentary leg and arm silhouetted against the flames. He was considering the possible effect of a random shot at the coffee-pail, squatting clear in his sight, when an incident, sudden and startling, brought commotion in the camp. A pair of graceless legs and the tail of a drab ulster passed rapidly between him and the firelight, and accompanying the movement a familiar twanging voice smote his ears:

“By the sonorous whisper o’ my Moll mule, gen’l’men, I’m rejoiced to meet ye! Don’t rise, I implore ye!”

Both “Hicksy” and Bartle had leaped up, each with a hand on a weapon, but the visitor, with a sweeping flourish, besought them not to be disturbed.

“It would pain me deeply, gen’l’men, to feel that I wah troublin’ ye. Hev ye seen anything of a yaller mule named Moll?”

At once the manner of the “sooners” was most hospitable. The stranger having made no show of war, his soft, clangorous voice rising only in a note of gentle inquiry, the

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relief they experienced inclined them to a show of great cordiality.

"Stranger," said Mr. Bartle, "we've seen neither hide ner hoof o' the animal ye're lookin' fer, but we've got some spankin' good coffee hyer, if ye care to sample et."

"You bet," supported Mr. Hicks; "and I jedge our hawg meat ain't the worst in Oklahomer. Ye'll hev to jine us in a bite er two."

The newcomer made a most deprecating motion.

"Yer hospitality, gen'l'men, touches me, but I couldn't think o' puttin' ye out."

Nevertheless, after some further insisting by the "sooners," and a proper amount of hesitancy, the visitor finally arranged his figure in a sociable sprawl by the fire, from which position, during the remaining preparations for supper, he entertained his hosts by a humorous account of the tribulations which had oppressed him through the ownership of a certain mule. From time to time he interrupted himself to laugh long and boisterously, and in each instance Mr. Bartle and Mr. Hicks, catching his hilarity, would join

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in. He had a wonderful fund of anecdote, and it flowed in a copious stream until supper was announced. Even then, during the progress of the meal, his tongue wagged on at a lively rate.

“Gen'l'men,” he observed, glancing quizzically around through the gathering dusk, “you’ve struck a right valuable claim hyer, hain’t ye? ’Bout the choicest quarter-section in the whole Territory, this is. Runnin’ water on two sides, and every acre, ’cept the creek bottoms, the richest prairie land, to say nothin’ of her adj’inin’ the county-seat. Goin’ to work her j’intly, I s’pose?”

Mr. Bartle gave his comrade a swift, sagacious glance.

“Why, ye see,” said Hicks, “we *had* figured that as the best plan, seein’ as it takes two to hold a claim these stirrin’ times, once ye git it. While one is hustlin’ supplies, fer instance, t’other kin stay an’ hold the title. It saves a lot of argymint.”

“Exactly,” returned the ulster, chuckling. “I appreciate the p’int, fer it’s the identical old idee *I* had in mind; but knowin’ t’other feller wouldn’t see the advantage of it, I re-

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frained from presentin' my plan. I had jest lit on an elegant quarter-section, right here in your neighborhood, when a wild-eyed son-of-a-gun come gallavantin' down on me like a rory-bory-Alice, and persuaded me to retire. As I had no steed in sight to prove thet I'd *rid* thar, he called me a 'sooner' and insinuated thet I'd been campin' thar fer weeks. Then he p'inted a pair o' 'sixes' at me with both hands, and 'lowed I'd find it a good deal healthier on the adj'inin' section. I was so incensed, gen'l'men, at his discourtesy thet after framin' a proposition o' partnership in my mind, I disdained to honor him with it. And all owin' to the absence of a condemned, ornery, saw-toothed, punkin' yaller mule!"

The three of them again laughed long and unrestrainedly, the "sooners" thinking here was a man of their class, and at the close of their outburst Mr. Hicks, leaning toward the ulster, said, meaningly, while he beamed with good humor:

"I'd hate, stranger, to lay a good deal thet you ever *had* a mule!"

The visitor at once assumed a most injured look, which, however, only served to

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increase the hilarity of the "sooners." They were very shrewd.

To the cowboy, resting comfortably in the log, within three yards of this interesting group, the ulster, who he knew *did* own a mule, presented a problem in character too intricate for solution. He accordingly turned his entire thought to the men Bartle and Hicks, who it was plain were two of a brand. To them he could no longer forego the satisfaction of announcing himself. Abruptly, therefore, at a pause in the conversation, he drew his entire body out into the glare of the fire, and turned the muzzle of his weapon carelessly toward the "sooners."

"Gentlemen," he said, serenely, "I own this land!"

CHAPTER XXII

A FEW HOSTILITIES

IT did not occur to him to accompany the remark by a definite aiming of his weapon, which, therefore, was pointed at neither ruffian in particular, but wavered in a manner to cover first one, then the other of the pair. Immediately he had cause to deplore this negligence. The commotion produced by his appearance, while exactly what he had expected, was yet so sudden and violent as to bewilder him. He remembered firing twice at a gigantic bounding object which seemed to approach him in a succession of hand-springs and which developed on closer acquaintance into the person of Mr. Bartle, who, with a yell of pain at his second shot, fell furiously upon him. The fashion of his hold left it impossible for Butternut to make further use of his weapon, and the cowboy at once understood that he was called upon

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to make the best of an awkward transaction, while at the same time his uppermost sensation was a keen delight in the effect of his second bullet, which he knew had lodged somewhere in the person of his foe. However, he realized that all exertions now possible on his part must be of brief enaction, since few moments could elapse before his adversary would receive the support of his comrade. Accordingly, in the close embrace of Mr. Bartle, he went desperately over the earth in a series of quick revolutions. But despite his preoccupation, there was time for amazement when, being thrown suddenly into a position which brought his glance in the direction of the fire, he observed there a remarkable performance in progress. Mr. Hicks, in the act of springing to the relief of his comrade, was suddenly seized by the drab ulster and borne violently backward to the earth, while in the same instant the air seemed filled with the jangle of two voices, one uttering oaths of bitterest quality, the other making vehement reference to a certain mare mule. The astonished cowboy next observed, when this separate encounter had attained its fiercest height, the

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sudden glimmer of firelight on steel, which was followed by the click of snapping metal, and as the intertwined figures rose upright he saw that the wrists of the ulster's adversary were secured by handcuffs. But the gyrations of the ulster by no means ceased at this point. Addressing a low remark into the ear of Mr. Hicks, which had the effect of causing the ruffian to remain inactive, he waltzed over to Bartle, whose wound seemed to have endowed him with a fury which gave him strength. The Lambkin was expending a gallant final effort when he felt his assailant wrenched clear of him with a violence which sent his own body spinning. He fell in an exhausted heap, and lay for some moments stupefied, then rising confusedly on his elbow he saw that the ulster had both men in charge, and with a knife and some strips of cloth in hand was giving surgical attention to the injured Bartle. In the flare of the firelight the three figures bore the aspect of shadows, but their attitudes showed the Lambkin clearly which was master of the field. The hand of the bewildered cowboy, fumbling over the ground, came in contact with his revolver,

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and he grinned in a foolish fashion as he replaced the weapon at his hip. Next he rose and walked sheepishly into the firelight, his hand at his chin. The ulster was bending attentively over Mr. Bartle's arm, while holding that member toward the light.

"Ye swatted him in the muscle, sonny," he remarked, imparting a final touch to the rude bandage, "so I reckon it ain't fatal."

Butternut advanced with the demeanor of one who would like to know more of the circumstances, but the air of the little old man restrained him. There was something strangely grim and commanding about the ulster as, having concluded his "operation," he began to walk back and forth in the firelight, swinging a weapon with his stride and keeping an unvarying eye on his prisoners.

Meanwhile, from over the plain and through the timber of the bottom came the sounds of hoofs and men—noises of a scattered throng. Swiftly, by the edge of the woods, the straggling boomers continued to hammer past. Frequently in the shadows rang the ax of an energetic squatter, already begun his improvements, while farther down

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the hollow, in accompaniment, floated scraps of conversation and song. Occasionally a horseman, battering by through the dusk, lifted his voice in a winding, nonchalant yell, to which the men in the hollow responded. In the tones of the latter there was a note of jubilation, for they had passed the crisis, and now the whole thing was to them a celebration. Periodically the cry of a lone wolf smote the night afar, as though in protest at these signs of human settlement, while always through the trees the melancholy beat of hoofs on the plain drummed a mournful chorus.

The drab ulster, continuing his stride up and down the range of firelight, from time to time bent his ear mysteriously toward the depths of the woods.

"It's the shots, sonny—yer two shots," he remarked to the Lambkin. "It's more'n likely they'll raise a row. The bottom's alive with 'sooners,' and I'm afeard we'll hev a neat entertainment gittin' these gentlemen out o' hyer." He indicated the two glowering captives.

Butternut was trying to decide whether he should construe these words as a rebuke, when

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the abrupt splintering of brush and a low roar of voices told of advancing men. The ulster instantly, by a deft movement of his foot, struck the coffee-pail and sent its contents over the fire in a manner which brought darkness upon the camp. He governed the gesture so nicely, too, as to be thrown by its impetus within a hand's reach of his prisoners, and seizing the collar of one, he controlled the other by a significant pressure of his weapon, both of them having been disarmed. As he then, in an ominous whisper, which Butternut overheard, commanded them to advance, the Lambkin brushed the arm of the old man, who, chuckling approval, turned the wounded Bartle over to his care.

Swiftly and with caution they proceeded through the gloom of the woods, halting presently in a thicket of tangled undergrowth. And now, abruptly, in the camp they had deserted arose a sullen wrangle and debate.

"Two shots 'n' a yawp," said one voice.

"And cusses," amended another, and this so increased the significance that it had an obvious effect upon the council. There followed a hoarse jumble of arguments.

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Butternut, retired in the brush-tangle, grew thoughtful of many things which in no wise concerned this menacing assembly. It was now possible for him to regard the ulster as other than a riddle—he was clearly an agent of the Government; but there were numerous other questions to distress the Lambkin. Where was his gallant horse, Roan Rebel? Where, too, was the famous Moll mule? Also it was inevitable that his mind should wander back over the plain to the woman episode. Where was Billy—the erring, the hopeless Billy? And——

“ . . . If I were going to be hanged——”

The wrangle in the shadows deepened in volume until it was clearly a thing of dire portentions. At intervals an oath swung aloft through the trees. Butternut, in a whisper, sought certain information of the ulster, who, listening, measured his response by the qualities of the tones of the men.

“ Do you think they’ll show their teeth? ”

“ Me son, the indications air they will. —Sof’ly, don’t ye chirp! ”

A hoarse noise in the throat of Mr. Hicks dying suddenly in a wheeze, Butternut knew

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the ulster's fingers had interfered. The old man made tedious effort to see through the gloom of the underbrush, and took a fresh grip on his weapon. The cowboy patiently shifted to a new position and waited, while the howl of the lone wolf struck a dismal note. The leaves of the wilderness whispered in the night wind, and from time to time the man in the ulster referred to the probabilities of a fight.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PASSING OF A WHIPPOORWILL

THE light of the moon, swinging low over the trees, reached the undergrowth in few localities. Here and there it appeared, a luminous fantasy in the long blending shadows, and these resplendent points were so occasional as merely to impart a new and deeper mystery to the woods. Generally in all quarters the gloom was as heavy as blankets, but it required no eye to know that the hollow was inhabited. A determined, ominous presence was revealed in the jumble and jar of men's voices in rough argument. Behind a prostrate cottonwood squatted a warlike row of figures which at certain points of their discussion paused to bestow attention upon a thicket of tangled mesquit. From this thicket came a silence of strange power, in that the more intense it was the more dread it inspired. The man at the end of the log swore cautiously at it.

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"They're in thah," he affirmed to his companions. "We know they're in thah. 'N' they dasn't come out!"

"Same as we dasn't go in, 'Griggisy,'" observed the third man from him, and an approving snicker traveled along the log. Griggisy's scowl was unseen in the darkness, but his tones swelled higher. He made a slurring allusion to the humor of some persons, and pointing his revolver indefinitely, sent a violent report bellowing through the trees. The succeeding quiet was so deep that it seemed to envelop the row of men like a substance. The shot, though its origin was palpable, had the effect of suggesting to them an invisible and menacing presence. There was a period in which they were immovable and would have felt a keen terror at the making of a sound. Then of a sudden from the depths of the thicket there issued two flashes, each the precursor of a bullet which clipped whistling through the foliage, and the next moment to no one, even could they have seen distinctly, would it have been apparent that there was a man behind the log. By a common impulse they had collapsed to the ground

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like paralytics. From the wake of one of the responding bullets a tiny, lone leaf settled down on Griggsy's hat. He was disconcerted. This sudden discourteous behavior of the jungle impressed him somehow as a phenomenon. He seemed amazed at a demonstration which he had exerted his best energies to bring about.

"Wull, dam' me," he mumbled in his beard, and to his comrades he added, in the superior tones of one sustained in a previous contention, "I know'd they wuh thah!"

After a period the dull voices jumbled again, and the man at the end of the log swore afresh at the silence in the thicket. Presently he grew profound. As the general in command it devolved upon him to devise some feasible plan of attack. So he wagged his beard reflectively, and at length decided that the happiest course would be to make a circuit of the enemy with most of his force and invade the jungle from behind. Accordingly he detailed a trusted man to remain stationed at the log, and with the others proceeded on a strategic movement through the brush. In line with their plan, the trusted man, during this maneuver, fired occasionally at

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the thicket with a view to holding its attention. His aim, however, was problematic, as he was careful only in keeping his scalp below the level of the log.

Griggsy and his followers moved with the noiselessness of apparitions, despite the irregular growth of the bushes, and by zigzagging discreetly escaped the patches of moonlight. Twice they halted to whisper their understanding of the plan, while they gestured menacingly toward the thicket.

Meanwhile the ulster and the Lambkin, unconscious of the strategy in progress, were returning the spattering compliments of the man behind the log.

It was at this juncture that suddenly, and from a quarter entirely new to all parties in this discussion, there came a shot which produced an abrupt and terrific commotion in the rear of the thicket. The report had scarcely died away before a second shot, from the same independent quarter, renewed the effect of the first bullet. The tearing of brush by heavy bodies, blended with a torrent of vigorous language, told that Griggsy and his forces were being assailed by a foeman in

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ambush. The Lambkin and the ulster, at once aware of the presence of an ally, and grasping this new location of the enemy, wheeled and began a systematic fire in that direction. There were sounds thereafter of tumultuous disagreement.

And the "sooners" were not versed in battle. If any of them could recall experiences wearing the glitter of war, they were moments of blare and bluster when no really fine behavior had been required. In consequence, these feverish ways of the woods filled them with a consternation they could not suppress, but which was in no way apparent from their noise. They filled the night with marvelous curses and yells. The woods to them were aswarm with perils most sinister, and, conceiving a moment for veterans, they expressed their valor in a swift stream of sound.

But a battle in the dark, at uncertain range, with bushes in plenty to intercept the bullets, and the forces of both sides hugging close to the earth, can not at best be regarded as a very hazardous affair. It may be creative of much commotion and tremendous noise, but the result can scarcely be such as a man

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could not contemplate with a calm mind. To a person actively engaged in such conflict, however, it is naturally of a huge, grim import, and he may be excused if he regards it as a crisis.

For some time an apparently terrific battle was raging in the woods. The drab ulster alternately shouted and sang while he and the Lambkin fusiladed the bushes, the cries of Griggisy and his companions at moments drowned the voice of their firearms, the unknown newcomer from his retired position in the shadows occasionally screamed a challenge. But when it was over—when the advance of dawn left it wise in the minds of the “sooners” to withdraw—the spectacle presented was not particularly appalling. There were revealed no dead upon the field, and the “sooners,” it was evident, were not even seriously disabled, for they had vanished to the last man. The general result, however, in no wise diminished the high esteem in which Butternut and the ulster held the battle. As the day broke clear over the bottom the old man was feverishly passing a rag through the chambers of his weapons, while he re-

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garded his captives with a highly important air. Butternut was standing guard. The Lambkin had a slight wound in the arm, but he wore it with pride, as befitted a conqueror. True, he once thought of Bartle's wound, and wished that by way of variation *his* had been a leg!

After a time it occurred to him to make a search for the gallant stranger who had so valiantly aided in the victory. The same important light in which he regarded the battle made him feel that this mysterious unknown had been of much assistance. It was due him, therefore, to be treated as a fellow victor. Accordingly, leaving the captives in the care of the ulster, the Lambkin proceeded through the bushes to the point whence the independent firing had issued. In the center of a small clearing he came suddenly upon a young man in "city" dress sitting complacently, his back to a stump.

"Billy! Jumpin' Tarant'lers—Billy!"

In the happiness of the moment the Lambkin lost utterly the dignity of a general, as well as all his past bitter feeling. As the tenderfoot sprang up he encircled him with

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his sound arm in a show of inexpressible delight, while Billy's keen pleasure was equally apparent. Under the fire of Butternut's swift questions he explained how he had followed along several hours after the parting on the plain. Galloping by the creek at sunset, he had sighted the Lambkin's horse by the ford, and halting, had pitched camp, thinking the cowboy would return presently.

"But you never showed up, and I went to sleep waiting. Then about midnight I was roused by pistol-shots, and, prowling through the brush, I came upon a bunch of bush-whackers bent on trouble. So as a matter of principle I backed behind a stump and blazed into them."

"I see," said Butternut; and he added, with a smile of banter, "How's the Whip'-will?"

But Billy was anxious on other matters.

"I hope you have 'nailed' your claim, Jones?"

"Yes, William." The Lambkin made an impatient movement with his hand, while his smile broadened. "Where's the Whip'-will?"

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"I guess *I* haven't much choice now——"

"It'll take both of us to hold mine. Where'd you leave the Whip'will?"

Then Billy made an idle gesture:

"The Whippoorwill? Oh, she's dead."

The Lambkin's face froze. It took on the tone of cold clay. He made as if to turn, but it was the motion of a weed. His hand performed a piteous outward movement, the appeal of the blind. He turned a dull gaze upward, and made a wheezy, hoarse sound in his throat.

"Yes," pursued Billy, indifferently. "She fell just as I turned—you didn't see her—and she was never conscious afterward. I got her to some water in a squatter's tent, but she died in an hour. . . . I stayed only long enough to bury her. Rather a sad case, Jones. Say you knew her?"

"Yes," said the Lambkin, in a slow voice. "We were quite old friends, Billy."

He looked abstractedly off through the trees.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SOUNDS OF A DIRGE

ONE corner of Butternut's and Billy's claim abutted on the town of Perry, which in the afternoon of this second day was grown, as if by enchantment, from a mere soldiers' camp on the line of the Santa Fé to a booming county-seat with a population of over six thousand, at least half of which would be permanent.

Of buildings there was none, though a number were in course of erection, but all over the site were squatted square bleach tents which, viewed from a distant hill, but for the contradictory presence of the bawling boomers, were not unlike a herd of white buffalo. On every hand appeared establishments teeming and humming with varied industries. Bakeshops, butcher-shops, barber-shops, "general merchandise," land-agents,

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opticians, photographers, the inevitable Chinaman with his laundry-sign, fortune-tellers, shooting-galleries, theaters and saloons—all were here, in tents, and conducting a metropolitan business. The fakirs with their gambling games were probably the most active, and certainly the most noisy. There were shell-games, wheels o' fortune, and knife-boards and rings in plenty, and the florid man with the baby dolls and baseballs was there, announcing to the swarming populace that for every three "babies" they struck consecutively they would get a half-dollar. What with canvas and pink lemonade and peanuts everywhere, there was only wanting the elephant and the sawdust to make it "circus day."

Perhaps half a mile from this bustling scene, on the open plain, yet so near the timber along the creek as to be well in the shade of the cottonwoods, Billy and the Lambkin had pitched their tent. They had also, a few yards from their quarters, hoisted a large white flag which, when the wind was strong, gave to the world the following information:

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This Claim,
By right of priority,
Is the property of
CHARLES JONES
and
WILLIAM WHITE.

Attest :

JOSEPH PLUMMER,
Deputy U. S. Marshal, Guthrie.

The drab ulster had himself added the bottom line, remarking to the Lambkin, with a smirk of pride:

“ I jedge that’ll fetch ’em, sonny. There ain’t a dozen posted men in Oklahoma that ain’t heard o’ old Joe Plummer, an’ them that ain’t won’t keer to go monkeyin’ with Uncle Sam. But if ye *should* git into trouble, why, thar’s my address.”

He had escorted his two prisoners to the town, and, delivering them there to an able lieutenant, returned to bid Butternut and Billy good-by.

As he left them now, his Lilliputian legs taking him toward the town, Butternut, looking admiringly after him, remarked:

“ A mighty bold man, William, for his

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size. I don't believe he'd think any more o' facin' the mouth of a cannon than of eatin' his breakfast."

As the Lambkin, leaning against the center-pole at the entrance to his tent, surveyed the howling young metropolis in the distance, there was sadness in his heart. Billy could not understand why a man who, from being virtually penniless, was suddenly become a comparatively wealthy person, should show no signs of elation, although he well knew that the Lambkin was a man who would never make a great noise. Billy was jubilant. He had refused to consider Butternut's offer of an equal share until the Lambkin had made it plain that it would be impossible for one man to maintain his rights to a claim so valuable against the army of contestants who, on adjoining sections, were already filling the land with arguments. With two partners, each could be the other's "witness," and there need never be a time when the foot of a rightful owner should be remote from his property.

The tenderfoot, inside their quarters, was improvising a table by attaching some awk-

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ward legs to a soap-box. From time to time he cast an inquiring eye toward the Lambkin, leaning gracefully against the tent-pole and looking musingly toward the town. There was something so suggestive of loneliness in his attitude that Billy began to have a suspicion, but smiled it aside as he asked, impatiently:

“The woman, Jones—she was nothing to you?”

And the Lambkin, without turning his head, replied, in his quiet voice:

“She was my wife, Billy.”

And Billy was dumb for the rest of the day.

The death-hour ever brings the tenderest emotions uppermost, but the Lambkin's thoughts, any more than to forgive her with his whole heart, were not upon the Whip-poorwill. They say that to pity oneself is a dwarfish thing, but that can not be true, for the Lambkin was lost in a sea of self-pity, and his was anything but a small nature. It may be that the solemnity of the moment had much to do with his lofty plane of thinking, and that later, losing its influence in the strife

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of an active life, he would view things in a more rational light, but now he could only feel in his heart that the death of the Whippoorwill could mean nothing to him. To be merely legally free in no way removed the baleful blot from his past, nor enabled him to escape the law of conscience. On the contrary, that black period of his life was merely magnified by the great potency of his love. While it was not in him to presume that the Girl from Missouri cared in any way for him, he believed that there were no previous sacred claims upon her heart, and frankly felt that he might set out to win her with the chances fair in his favor, but—his dance-hall experiences were something which in his present mood he could not bring himself to the point of confiding to her, and even if, by distorting his view-point and observing a false standard, he could lessen the task, such a standard could never be hers. It was terribly ironical that the other one should have lived only long enough to enter his life and destroy it.

He did not notice Billy pass out of the tent on his way to the town for provisions.

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The tenderfoot was not jubilant now. He journeyed with thoughtful steps to the city of tents, entering which he turned an abstracted eye upon the swarming, buzzing inhabitants. He lost a dollar or two at the gambling games in the hope that the amusement might change his mood, and he tried to interest himself in the noisy utterances of an agent proclaiming the last rise in values, but it was useless. Not even the sudden offering of a small fortune for his "share" enthused him. He could only stroll aimlessly about, with his hands in his pockets, and, thinking of Butternut's last remark, mumble mournfully to himself, "Well, I will be damned!"

It was toward the end of the afternoon when a little commotion started from the soldiers' camp at the end of the town, and an awful whisper stirred the air. The cavalry corporal was killed! The gallant gray, becoming unmanageable and prancing sideways instead of running with the line, had gone down, and the wan lips of his rider would never again blow a bugle.

As this news flashed along from the soldiers' camp, whither the dying man had been

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brought, the wheels o' fortune were suddenly stilled, the voices of the feverish multitude ceased, and a pulseless, dead feeling smote every breast like a cold and heavy hand. It was probable that the death of no person that day could have excited deeper general sorrow, for he was best known to all. He had been the great man of the day, and the halo of his importance was to follow him to the grave.

The boomer and the huckster hushed their cries, and, as is always true of such times, a subtle feeling of stronger brotherhood pervaded the air. The cowboy and the gambler were strangely silent, and enemies for the moment were few in this throng. The air was heavy with the presence of a vast, silent lamentation.

Down by the camp stood a group of mute soldiers, in gleaming white trousers and cotton gloves, awaiting the sunset hour. So immaculate was their attire, they might have been awaiting the call for dress parade. The captain, voiceless from sorrow, was moving his gloved hands in advisory and pathetic gestures.

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At a quarter of an hour to sunset the sad little procession took its way toward a hill, to the chanting notes of bugle and fife and the solemn rumble of the drum. As they moved across the plain with measured military stride, they might have been a procession of specters, such was their effect upon the on-lookers. There was none save soldiers in this death-march. The grave being in full view of the town, each man felt that he was sufficiently present, and that to stand at a distance and leave the matter to those who had been nearest him was the part of honor and respect. But a little company of sorrowing cowboys, with bared heads, could not forbear blending with the drum and fife a few strains from a song of lament.

These sounds reaching Butternut, retired in his tent in the distance, struck cold to his heart. Some one had told him that the cavalryman who had ridden the gray was being buried, and though his sympathies were ever strong, it was like adding another weight to his own woes—a sinister scheme of Destiny to impress him with his own desolation. To him

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this solemn chanting of fife and drum was not over the grave of the corporal, but over that other grave, back on the prairie, that Billy had told him of, the grave of the Whippoorwill, the destroyer of his love and life, wherefore was he again plunged into the sea of self-pity. To have erred unwittingly in the beginning was bad enough, and now to err consciously by following the lead of his impulse was something he determined to put among the things impossible, preserving untarnished the gospels of his heart. Taking her viewpoint as his own, he saw, between his unwholesome past and the white standards of the Girl from Missouri, a chasm of contrast which made the trail hopeless. So farther and farther from him, under the passing strains of this dirge, she seemed moving, while somewhere in his mind, along the black wall of his despair, flashed crimson pictures of their hours together, their first meeting, the Green Fork dance, the ride on the River Road. Even these happy memories seemed now in the grasp of phantoms, and it was like the knell of his own doom to hear the cowboys singing:

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“ ‘Bury me not on the lone prairie,
Where the wild coyotes may howl o’er me,
Where the rattlesnake glides to his cottonwood lair,’
But they took no heed to his dying prayer;
In a narrow grave just six by three,
They buried him there on the lone prairie.”

Billy, returning from his errand to town, and slinking through the opening in the tent, found him there, his lone figure—dim in the evening half-light—bowed upon the table, his head in his arms.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TURTLE MAKES A SPEECH

SIX weeks later. You would scarcely know the town of Perry now, compared to its appearance on the day of its birth. It is a real city. There are not more than a score of tents in sight, and these belong chiefly to wandering mountebanks, gamblers, and fortune-tellers, who can not be counted as citizens. The pink-lemonade men have been dispersed by the cooler weather, but if the wind is toward you as you near the town you can smell the roasting peanuts for a mile. The florid man with the baseballs and dolls is still here, beaming enticingly while he volleys his remarks at the passing populace.

Both the residence and business portions are a delight to the eye. Squares as nicely platted as a chess-board, streets as straight as bowling-alleys, a bank, post-office, depot, "hotel," and half a dozen stores already

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erected, buildings of all sizes, most of them unpainted and many unfinished—all contrive to present a pleasing example of the wonders of enterprise. The air is thick with the signs and sounds of industry, and with the cries of the venders and fakirs are now blended the clatter of new lumber, stacked in piles by the teamsters hauling it from the railroad, and the shouts of the joiners, while the rhythmic noises of the hammer and the saw are everywhere.

At one of the three corners facing the half-built court-house is the provision market, displaying a resplendent array of "cuts" and game, at another you can find "dry-goods and groceries," and at the last is a thriving saloon, with swinging green doors and a brand-new walnut bar, with a brass foot-rod running the length of it, enabling the thirsty citizen to drink in the attitude of a man ascending a stair. And all these places are alive to overflowing.

Billy and the Lambkin, at the end of the first week following the opening, had prospered beyond their wildest speculations, and were developing a fine taste in the matter of

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cigars. At the close of the third week they had disposed of part of their claim for town-lots at "fancy" prices, while the value of their remaining acres had gone far into the thousands. Now, after six weeks, having reinvested wisely the proceeds of all sales as fast as received, they possessed each a fair fortune, and the Lambkin was a director of the bank.

They had also profited largely from their negotiations in behalf of others, for while Butternut wrote a bold and graceful hand and had a flow of speech that was fascinating, Billy, who had included some law in his studies, had a mighty shrewd eye for running over a paper.

"Buyin' and sellin' isn't in my line, William," the Lambkin had said, "but if you'll be the brains o' the concern, I'll try to keep up the interest."

Thus many an able lawyer, with a real license, was obliged to look on with pocketed hands while the line of hungry investors curved like a tidal-wave to the land-office of Jones & White.

Butternut, to the great delight of Billy,

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had brightened up wonderfully within the last few weeks. There had been a time when he could only wander morosely about, like a man with weights in his shoes, with an unfeeling eye, save for the things his memory held, and even ceasing for a while to give attention to his dress, but of late there had been a change. He had bought a neat-fitting civilian's suit, and—the ecstatic Billy could not mistake it—there was a sympathetic speech in his eye. Butternut was becoming cheerful, as many another has done, from necessity. The same immutable law which caused an agonized woman, down in Texas, to turn in helpless appeal to the blandishments of a man of small soul, made the Lambkin now put his dead heart in the background and seek forgetfulness in the excitement of gathering a fortune.

He was helped greatly in this by the absence of anything in his environment which might bear a relationship to other days. He had heard once from the Berry boys—they had “proved” two claims farther up the Strip, and in consequence were prospering—but aside from this letter there had been

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nothing to bring to him the slightest reminder of the past.

On a certain afternoon, during a quiet in business, Billy was "keeping office," and the Lambkin, down the street, was idly patronizing the man with the baseballs and dolls, while a laughing crowd looked on. As he missed for the third time the loafers grew hilarious.

"Git on to his curves!"

"D'ye think he could hit a barn?"

"Might, if he t'row'd a hay-stack or a balloon."

Then a slow, familiar voice spoke:

"Better try a lasso, Butternut."

The utterance of his half-forgotten name made him wheel instantly, to see at his shoulder, regarding him affably, a swarthy man with a menacing eye, the vicious expression of which was ludicrously contradicted by the rest of his face.

"Turtle Mose, by the Jumpin' Hills!"

There followed a hearty hand-shake, a few delighted words of comradeship, then a hurried adjournment to the establishment with swinging doors, where they discovered

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a gap at the walnut bar, and a conversation prolonged and luxurious ensued.

Mose, in the beginning, did most of the talking, for Butternut had finally reached that stage when he could listen not only with calmness but with a moderate delight to such intelligence as it now became the Turtle to divulge. Mose had quit the ranch just one week before, and he was therefore "loaded to the muzzle" with news. He confined his discourse, however, to the Circle-B and its environs. Certain information he had gathered the night of the "blow-out" at the Twin Bar told him that on some points it were wiser for him not to touch, so between the times of disposing of the tall, foaming glasses with which Butternut supplied him he talked only on topics which were safe. True, he felt obliged to inform his friend that he had transferred his dog over to Twin Bar as directed, but he did this innocently, and got quickly back to other themes.

"Scotty's moved his things into your cabin, an' is takin' keer o' your books, an' the boys air lookin' after Biz; but I reckon they've all got a good lickin' laid up fer you

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fer tearin' off so all-fired sudden, an' never a letter sayin' where you was. McCormick 'specially is achin' to take you in hand, an' only t'other night I hyern Talbot tellin' his wife that the old ranch was like a alkali desert since you quit us."

An instant the Lambkin felt a vapor before his eyes, a persistent obstruction in his throat. How fitting were these words to his own desolate heart, but withal it was not unpleasant to hear them. He tried to narrow his recollection to his comrades of the Circle-B, to his many buoyant discussions with Scotty, tried not to think of the River Road, but it was useless. Memory and inclination were too much for him.

"The Twin Bar, Mose—hasn't changed hands, has she?"

"Naw, but it's mighty lonesome over thar since Cap'n Kitty an' her folks shook the place. Her uncle, ye know, had to be in Washin'ton this month, an' she an' her aunt went back to Kansas City. I think the ranch is for sale."

The Turtle spoke very carelessly, while he gazed intently at his glass. He did not

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dare look the Lambkin in the eye lest his own should reveal all that the pallid, suffering face of a woman had told him the night of Reddy Tums's story.

Butternut had found a spot on the bar which was not overflowed, and was making some figures on the back of an envelope.

"Fifteen—twenty-five—forty— Yes, by sellin' out everything I ought to be able to buy it."

"Buy what, Lambkin?"

"The Twin Bar."

This quiet statement caused the Turtle to set down his half-emptied glass, while his eyes grew as large as lemons.

"Buy the Twin Bar—you! Lambkin, air ye plumb crazy?"

"Not exactly, Mose. Just crazy enough to hand 'em over the money any time, unless they've raised the price. Would you like to go back to Texas and work for me?"

The Turtle was still shaking his head skeptically, so the Lambkin, with boyish pride, drew a fat bank-book from his pocket and showed him some footings. The bank-book alone, being an article which to the Tur-

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tle's mind bespoke colossal sums, was enough to satisfy him, but by way of gaining time in which to suppress a tendency to explode, he bent over the figures like a schoolboy over a puzzle. When finally he lifted his head, his cheeks were still puffed out, until the explosion seemed imminent.

"Don't you reckon I can buy it, Mose?" mildly inquired the Lambkin.

The Turtle with difficulty allowed his gathered wind to escape noiselessly, but he could not refrain from rising on the brass foot-rod and pounding the bar with his fist, while he uttered such prolonged and vehement ejaculations of joy that the observant barkeeper, as well as some of the imbibing citizens, viewed him with apprehension until a quiet glance from the Lambkin assured them.

"Shoot me fer a lizard!" screeched the delighted cowboy. "Skin me fer a jack-rabbit! Saddle me to a bull's tail an' start me over the prairie! If this don't squash me! Butternut Jones buyin' the Twin Bar! Smoke me if I couldn't jest jump the Pecos at her widest point! What'll Talbot do? What'll Scotty think? What'll Jimsey *say*?"

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Will I *work* fer ye, Lambkin! I'll do anything fer you if you'll only let me be aroun' when they hyer this!"

Butternut's heart glowed at this exhibition of honest joy. He not only assured the Turtle that if the trade was made his wish should be fulfilled, but he presented the cowboy with a check for a hundred dollars and invited him to supper at the "hotel," where they could talk it over.

"Come up to my office in an hour," said the Lambkin, snapping his watch. "I want you to meet my partner and see some o' our possessions before we feed."

He then bought the Turtle a good cigar, and, turning, left the cowpuncher gaping after him until his tall figure vanished through the swinging doors.

Proceeding at once to a news-stall, the Lambkin purchased a Kansas City paper, and glanced hurriedly through the advertisement section. Sure enough, in the "Land" column, he found the following:

"FOR SALE.—60,000 acres grazing-land, well stocked, in Val Verde County, Texas,

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between Devil's River and the Pecos, 23 miles north of the Southern Pacific. Apply to Carson Mills, Agent, Kansas City."

"The Twin Bar, sure as shootin'," quoth the Lambkin.

He moved to the edge of the street, and ran a satisfied eye over as much of the town of Perry as lay within his range. He owned the building in which was the saddlery opposite, as well as a half-interest in the market-house, a block farther down the street, and he was a director in the Bank of Perry. He even owned stock in the railroad company, one of whose trains was at that moment puffing out from the little green station.

"I reckon I *could* buy it," he mused, "but I'd have to sell out, and I've got a mighty good thing *here*."

He walked thoughtfully to his office, where he found Billy, his feet elevated in the window-frame while he absorbed the evening *Bugle*. The door and windows were open, for the afternoons were not yet too cool for that. Greeting his partner cheerily, the

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Lambkin turned to his desk and began to figure in earnest.

The air held a feeling of activity and newness, but he was oblivious. The cries of the workmen, the *kink-kink* of a blacksmith at the far end of town, the pungent smell of shavings and smoke, blending with the perfumed breath of the prairies and coming in to him like an incense, were things he heeded not.

For perhaps half an hour had he been engrossed in calculations, when a swarthy man with a vicious eye came tearing along the street like a frantic bull, at a speed which knocked all obstacles out of his way, while his gaze swept both sides of the thoroughfare for the sign-board of Jones & White. His menacing eye lighting presently on the object of his search, he seemed to double his already remarkable pace, and a minute later, lumbering through the door and blowing like a porpoise, he confronted the man who had said he might buy the Twin Bar. Billy drew his feet from the window-sill and started toward the intruder, but the fellow was talking now, and he did not interrupt.

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“Lambkin! Lambkin!” wheezed the Turtle. “Ain’t you hyeerd? I jest met the Shuffler, an’ he says—he says—*the Whip’will is dead!*”

Butternut had half-risen from his chair in his interest, but he at once resumed his sitting posture, and his brow clouded impatiently as he said:

“Shucks, Mose. I thought you had some news.”

Then the Turtle screamed:

“*News!* Gawd Almighty, Lambkin, if that ain’t news to you, then all I kin say is, what you doin’ here—with Cap’n Kitty jest dyin’ fer love of you——”

The Lambkin was on his feet instantly, and had the Turtle by the shoulders, his heart beating wildly.

“What’s the matter with you, Mose?”

And the Turtle saw that he knew what his friend did not; therefore he gabbled on with ecstatic defiance:

“*Nawthin’s* the matter with me—’ceptin’ I know a whole lot, an’ what I know best is that I wouldn’t treat a coyote like you’re a-treatin’ *her!*—Reckon I wasn’t at Jimsey’s

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blow-out the night she fainted plumb cold after hearin' o' the Whip'will—Reddy Tums, drunker'n a fool, blabbin' on you to the whole gang!—Reckon I didn't see her turn all white as a ghost when she hyern you was a married man!—An' when I follered her to the house to tell her I'd brought your dawg, didn't she turn all cold ag'in when I said you was gone—an' that wooden-headed city feller tryin' to do the soothin' act an' she wouldn't hev it at all!—Lambkin, you make me *sick!* ”

Butternut, seeing there was no questioning this man's earnestness, as he listened to the broken words was at first stupefied, speechless, his surprised senses failing to comprehend, then gradually there warmed into his blood a tranquil song of delight. He felt his dead heart alive again with sudden fire, his pulses tingled with the vital glow of living, his whole figure vibrated with the immensity of his joy. Somewhere in his leaping brain a voice went singing a strain the like of which he had never heard, but which is the language of all Nature, the white rose of a nation's night. It seemed to be telling him that he was no longer the mere owner of a

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part of the town of Perry, but that he possessed the earth, and accordingly he went reaching for his property. Through the open windows came the autumn fragrance of the prairies, and the clarion sounds of industry spoke a new tongue to him. The clatter and call of the teamsters stacking lumber reached him in a voice he understood, the rhythmic noises of the hammer and the saw filled his soul with glad music, and even a puffing old engine in the railroad yard seemed to gather the burden of his song:

She had loved him!

CHAPTER XXVI

IN MISSOURI

THE walls of the office of Mr. Carson Mills, realty and rental agent, Kansas City, bespoke plainly the nature of the negotiations there conducted. They were spotted with pictures of cities and sites, and suburban charts and maps, and the long counter was profusely strewn with catalogues, directories, and railroad folders.

Mr. Mills, a middle-aged, quick-voiced man, with that geniality of expression which always goes with spectacles, sat alertly in his revolving-chair, and while he made some figures on a pad, conversed confidently with Mr. Richard Thorne, who had been so long one of his most valued patrons that their acquaintance was a little more than a matter of mere business. Outside, as they talked, the hundred noises of an active city were a constant discordant rumble. It was mid-after-

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noon, when the sounds of traffic were highest, so that the two men were obliged to frequently bend nearer each other in order to be heard.

Thorne was with difficulty hiding an expression of being bored. It was always a torture for him to make these periodical visits to Mills, but he regarded it as a sort of necessity that he should once in a while pose as a man of business by way of retaining the agent's respect. Accordingly he was assuming a vital interest in the remarks of that gentleman, who of course was shrewd enough to give no sign that he understood.

"You say you have sold the Cawthorn property?" questioned the patron.

"Yes, sir. You'll find it in my statement for the month."

"Well, I wish you would apply the proceeds to improving the Huxley place. The tenant, I understand, is complaining."

The last report of Mr. Mills showed that the Huxley house had been put in thorough repair, but the agent knew that his patron had not looked at the statement, and so he replied, airily:

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"All right, sir."

After a few moments of similar discourse Mr. Mills tactfully turned the conversation to something more agreeable.

"How are things at the bluff house?" he inquired, with a wink, Thorne's special interest in the Ramsgate residence being not unknown to the agent.

Thorne's passive face scarcely changed. The woman he thought he loved had at last promised to marry him, but that had been at least a week ago, and he had grown so used to the thought that it had become commonplace. With the flavor of uncertainty gone, he found the affair strangely lacking in excitement. Still he was interested enough to have gone over this very afternoon and invited her to join his launch-party to-night, though he had not been consumed with regret when she declined. To the banter of the agent he replied, with just the glimmer of a smile:

"The thing's settled at last."

Mr. Mills, who had seen the announcement in the papers, at once extended his hand with a beaming face, as if the intelligence were fresh to him:

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"Well, I'll be quit-claimed! This *is* news! Accept my best, sir. I'm devilish glad. When's she coming off?"

"The twentieth, I believe. You're down for a card."

"Thanks. Stupendously obliged, I'm sure. James!"

A young man with a green shade over his eyes, who had been diligently plugging on a typewriter at the front of the office, reached the counter by a squirrel-like movement, the quick eye of Mr. Mills having sighted a caller at the door—a slender, well-dressed man, in whose bearing there was something which suggested his newness to the city, yet whose very suppleness of carriage and tranquil eye as he entered expressed his perfect assurance. He nodded civilly to the clerk, in a way which said that his business was with the proprietor, and leaning supinely against the counter sent a roving gaze over the maps on the wall.

The Lambkin's days in the town of Perry had been few since the interesting disclosure of the Turtle had brought an abrupt change in all his fine gospels. With the knowledge

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that the Girl from Missouri had loved him, there was an even chance that she loved him still, much as she might have struggled to disown it, and there had been something in this thought which caused him to promptly forgive himself and to understand that while weaknesses in the eyes of good women are not commendable, there are some flaws in a man's conduct which a woman who loves him may be persuaded to overlook. However, his gaze was now centered lovingly on a map of Texas, and for the time he was keenly interested in real estate. It was a felicitous method of the resourceful agent to insert a tack in each locality where he was prepared to buy or sell, and the Lambkin's eye, following the line of the Southern Pacific westward to the Pecos, lit upon one of these indicators planted in the heart of Val Verde County. He was evidently in the right place.

At the rear of the office there was a moment when the polite face of Dick Thorne seemed suddenly to have turned to bronze, but immediately he was himself again, and thankful for the providence which had placed him on his guard. While the clothes were

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new, he had instantly recognized the familiar face and figure which, though attractions he had once praised, he now hated as intensely as his narrow nature would permit. Not, by any means, that they had lost color in his eyes, but merely because their possessor had once figured as the object of a devotion, from a certain quarter, of a quality that *he* had never been able to inspire. Why, confound it, but for the lucky circumstance of a previous complication, she would have married him! It was an insult. Of course she had finally gotten over it, but the sting was there. He began to take the innocent presence of the visitor at the counter as nothing less than a bit of personal impertinence which intensified the elation he had always felt in the cowboy's peculiar helplessness. As he strode from the office, his "business" ended, Butter-nut greeted him with a breezy "Hello!" and was about to extend his hand, but as Thorne's gaze was frozen on the door, while he gave no sign, the Lambkin turned at once to the counter, both the snub and the man forgotten instantly.

The genial Mr. Mills waddled his fat

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legs along the inner side of the railing, and beamed commercially on the newcomer.

“Buying or selling, sir?”

“Why,” said the Lambkin, his gaze again on Val Verde County, “I *was* thinkin’ o’ takin’ that ranch off your hands, but I notice you’ve got it nailed.”

The broadening smile of the agent became less commercial. Here was a man of such contrast to the one who had just left him as to delight his soul.

“Staked, sir—staked is the word. Nothing in this office is nailed.”

It required very few moments for him to understand that his caller meant business, and he thereupon for a quarter of an hour wagged an eloquent tongue in behalf of the attractions of the property in question. And though he told many wonderful lies in support of his claims and got his localities sadly mixed (not limiting his range to things on the map), the mild-mannered Lambkin murmured never a word of dissent, but viewed him with an interest so transfixed that the agent experienced a pleasant thrill at his own powers.

“The finest grazing section in all Texas,

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sir—less than twenty miles from the railroad—to say nothing of her incomparable water facilities—Devil's River touching her at four points——”

“Must have twisted round considerably,” thought the Lambkin. Still the interest in his eye never flagged, for though he had no intention of closing with the *agent*, he did want other information.

“Now the senator told me——” he began, reflectively.

“The senator! You know Mr. Rams-gate?”

“Oh, quite well. Don't he *ever* come home these days?”

His tone indicated that one of the strongest reasons for his presence in the city was the hope that he might find the senator at home.

“Never, sir. Sticks to Washington like a leech. Well, I'll be quit-claimed! Never suspected you knew them. Been over to the house?”

“Why, no—if they're not at home——”

“Oh, his niece is there, and I guess she's having a lonesome time of it, for the old

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lady's away, too." And he added, with a wink of cordiality, for he was singularly drawn to this man, "her fiancé won't bother you, either—he's off fixing for a boat-party. Ha! ha!"

His gaze was carelessly in another quarter, as a man's gaze naturally travels when he laughs, so he did not see the instant's pallor of the Lambkin's face.

"Her fiancé?"

"Yes, the guy that snubbed you. It's in the papers. All set for the twentieth."

The blow would have been less vicious, of course, if he had been in any degree expecting it; but since the night at the Upper Ford, when the key to the secret places of her nature seemed to have been given him, he had never found it possible to regard Thorne as an obstacle. Through all the hopes and fears accompanying his swift journey to Missouri, following the speech of Turtle Mose, the cry of his heart had been, 'Will she let me see her? Will she forgive me? Can I make her love me?'—the background of his mind holding no shadow of a man of fashion. But now there flashed home to him the utter rea-

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sonableness, the perfect naturalness of a turn in Thorne's favor. She had had her day of loving fancies, and it was not surprising that she should adopt a liberal view toward a tangible and healthy object, who could not only at all times keep his best foot foremost, but who had *not* married a Whippoorwill—especially considering that loneliness with old age is not the violent desire of youth. Accordingly, at the careless words of Mr. Mills, the Lambkin turned cold to the scalp, that steadiness of nerve so strong a factor of his nature almost forsaking him. It was like the snapping of the final strand in his rope of hope. An instant the surrounding furniture seemed bobbing like things afloat, and the charts and pictures on the wall became a procession of grimacing dervishes dancing in time to the din in the street. But after that first flash of pallor, unnoticed by the agent, the woe of his heart was shown not in his face. His eye held nothing more than a light of quizzical surprise, and his voice was even and serene as he said:

“That so? Then I reckon I *had* better offer congratulations. So, if you'll just let

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our trade go till to-morrow, I'll wander over to the house. They haven't moved lately, have they?"

"No. Quickest way is to keep right out the avenue till you strike the boulevard, where you'll see the place—on the bluff just across the bridge. You'll know it easy—a yellow house with a cupola."

The Lambkin thanked him, laid his card on the counter, and strolled into the street. But instead of following the avenue, he walked aimlessly in another direction. His mind was revolving confusedly. The noises of the streets to his throbbing brain were like a hundred tumults, but he was heedless to passing vehicles and men. Since the revelation of the Turtle he had given his long-restrained ardor a free rein, that lamblike assurance which was his by nature making him feel that he had merely to journey to his reward. To have the folly of his faith then brought home to him was an experience which in bitterness was equaled by nothing on the calendar of his past. Slowly, listlessly, he wandered twice around a square, and once he entered a door guarded by a wooden In-

IN MISSOURI

dian, but though he was smoking when he came out he was not conscious of it. So his last wild hope had come to this! And after the speech of the Turtle had lifted him so high, it was hard, so hard to fall! He looked forward into the years and saw a desolate world through which he must journey joyless, with no buoy-lights for his heart's rest and for his lonely feet a forgotten, unblazed trail. By that reflex mind-action whose faculty is always to present pictures contrary to our moods, he found himself recalling those delights of his childhood which were most memorable—his first sight of a steamboat, for example, or certain days of splendor in his home village—days of barbecues and circuses, of glittering tin pageants. From time to time he paused at the intersection of a street running toward the river, and sent a piteous eye beyond the sky of windows and roofs and telegraph wires to where he knew she lived. He thought of the day she had come into his cabin, filling the room and his heart with joy—of the lovable grace with which she sat a horse—of the countless ways which made her dear to him.

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"If I could see her without frightening her," he mused hopefully, "I reckon there'd be a chance in a hundred. But, by God! they've set the day!"

As that thought would flash over him it would leave him beaten and crushed, and he would resolve to find his hotel and quit the town at once. He would go back to Oklahoma and resume the old business of losing himself—he would work and forget. But each time he moved in this direction a voice in his heart would stop him before he had traversed a square. Must he consider himself alone? Must he not consider her, and while there was a possibility of her deceiving herself into marrying a worthless man, was it not the part of gallantry and honor for him to intercede—to risk humiliation for *her* sake? Bosh! On what sort of a pinnacle was he putting himself? Maybe she had *never* cared for him! Maybe the Turtle had been blind! Or if she had, it was likely she had dutifully forgotten it—so why confront her like a ghost?

He wheeled resolutely for the last time and strode toward his hotel, determined not

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to change his mind again, but to keep to the course he knew was best. But always in his heart a voice kept saying:

“A hundredth chance — a hundredth chance!”

CHAPTER XXVII

BALANCE ALL

THE surroundings of the yellow house on the bluff presented nothing more than the everlasting sameness common to the tastes of rich men. The yard held the usual number of diagrams in color, two shaped like an "S," an anchor and a star; there was the fountain playing with the same old constancy, and there was Venus on one leg, beckoning to the postman.

In a corner room, up-stairs, Catherine was dividing her time between nervously fingering the various articles within her reach and periodically visiting the window to listlessly view the ebbing waters of the Missouri. Her declination of Richard's invitation she knew had not been due to any lack of consideration for him; she was simply in one of her nature-saddened moods when society irritated her. Such hours were new to Catherine, and she

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had not yet learned the best way to get through them.

She opened book after book, but it was life, not books, she wanted. She tried letter-writing, seeking to bring herself closer to the few friends she valued, but the cold blue paper and unfeeling slanting scratches failed to give back the warm human response for which she hungered.

Again she went to the window, her eye dropping from ledge to ledge, and down to the yellow waters, whose smooth flow seemed to bear her instantly to a narrower and redder stream winding remotely below a higher bluff, with the mountains beyond it, and along which spiritedly rode a girl too happy and interested in all things to suspect that life could know the emptiness of the present hour. Then another horse cantered beside hers, and a gentle face, with humor like a sun tempering its gravity, was turned to her own with a look that surely bespoke the innocence and sincerity of an untainted heart. And then—always at last—rose the contradictory picture of a ribald cowboy (she had apparently learned to forget his name, for always in her

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memory he was "the cowboy") wooing a tavern wench, with horror-striking details that made her shrink and curtain the eye of mind—to open it again on the only world that could ever be hers, the world of Richard Thorne. Heaven help her to be loyal to her new obligations, and teach these ghosts that would come in spite of her to know their time and place. With this prayer in mind she turned from the window with an outward briskness and determination apparently corresponding to some resolution within, and going to her desk wrote a note to Richard, saying that she had reconsidered and would be glad to join the boating-party. As she dropped the pen at the end, the door-bell rang.

"A Mr. Phillips, mum," said the maid. "Come to see about the ranch. Says the agent couldn't answer his questions. Showed him in the drawin'-room, mum."

Catherine, leaving the unsealed note on her desk, descended the stair with something like a living interest at her heart. She would hurry this interview to an end that she might the earlier prepare for the evening's enjoy-

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ment. Society sometimes was not wholly distasteful, and certainly Richard was not always tiresome. She would learn to like both even more, and life, perhaps, would yet afford her a fair measure of content. As she entered the room, a man who had been standing in shadow took a single step toward her, the action bringing him fair into the light. An instant she was in doubt whether to credit her sight, then, with a frightened gasp, would have turned to fly had not her astonishment held her powerless.

Before her, tall, tranquil, always gentle, *stood the cowboy!*

He was slightly pale, but the fractional impression of the old assuring smile as he looked at her, as well as the confident bearing of his whole figure—bent a little forward in a respectful half-bow—confirmed the truth that, whatever were his emotions, he could always be self-possessed.

She shrank back with a little alarmed cry, but instantly there was that in his eye, a light of pained surprise, which filled her with burning self-reproach. She had nothing to fear from this man, who could never pre-

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sume, never be familiar, or, above all, at such a time take advantage of a previous relationship.

"Mr. *Phillips!*" she cried at last, seeking relief in an assumption of resentment.

His smile broadened just perceptibly enough to show that he sought to reassure her, then he spoke, in his unvaryingly tranquil voice:

"Miss *Thurston*, I believe. I'll bet forty dollars you weren't lookin' for me!"

There was not the slightest eagerness in his speech, but then he could be amazingly cordial while imparting to his level tones nothing more than the courteously deferential. She felt a quality in his voice that seemed to bespeak the perfect security with which she might offer him her hand, and it brought a strange tremor of peace to her heart.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked, hospitably, motioning to a chair by the river window, but he went and stood by it instead. Then instantly her fright leaped to the surface again, and she faltered:

"You—you came—to—to——"

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"I came after Boodler, ma'am."

Divine Lambkin! Who could fail to be at ease in your wonderful presence? He had come to tell her of his love, to tell her of the Whippoorwill, but he was not the man to touch upon the language of his heart until he had made her smile. And then he would do so gradually—oh, so gently, and with such diabolical craft that she would never know that he was conscious of her disadvantage.

"Boodler is not here," she said, and she was smiling now. "I left him with Jimsey."

"Yes? I'm glad o' that. He'll be on hand then when I go down. Fine view you have here." He looked across the river at the sunset, then leaning from the window sent an admiring eye up and down the muddy Missouri. "Mighty bold stream, isn't she? Bigger than the Pecos; but don't you miss the mountains?"

Tender spot, Lambkin, the Pecos, for there lies the River Road where love first dawned!

"I do, indeed," she said; "but we can't have *all* we want. It pleases my uncle to sell the place."

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He inferred from this that it did not please her, and rejoiced in consequence.

"I'm glad you still like the mountains. I hope none of *them* will have moved away when I get back."

The air held a feeling in perfect keeping with the sentiment which now overflowed his soul, the noises of the city being just remote enough to emphasize the quiet of the hour. Softly through the evening came the whirr of distant vehicles, and the melancholy drone of an electric reached him like a song of sweetness. She thought it wiser not to show that she had noticed the dangerous trend of his last speech.

"You are really going back, then?"

"Yes'm—if we can make a trade."

"You have some one in mind who might buy the place?"

"I was thinkin' of takin' it myself," he drawled.

She did not know for an instant whether to take him seriously, this being one of the ways in which he had always been too much for her; then something seemed to tell her that he was in earnest.

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"Thinking of taking it yourself!" she repeated, bewilderedly, and he could not resist the impulse to prolong her astonishment.

"You haven't any objections, I hope?"

"Why, no—of course not—" she stammered, blushing. "But I—I—well—I had never supposed that you were a wealthy man."

His serene face was changeless as he said:

"Oh, it doesn't take a very wealthy man to buy a place like the Twin Bar. You see, it's roly and quite rocky in places, and really isn't so very rich in valley-land. Your price can't be much over fifty thousand?"

Then the helpless embarrassment in her face smote his conscience.

"You're quite right," he said, and she detected a touch of tenderness in his voice. "I *was* poor in those days—so poor that I could scarcely have bought a dozen cows. But I hope you'll sell me the Twin Bar to-day."

He laid a little emphasis on the familiar name, and being a woman, however high her fears ran, she could not forbear asking:

"Why the Twin Bar especially? Are there not many ranches quite as good?"

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“Possibly, for the mere business of raising stock. But, you see, I’m a man of some sentiment, and things have happened there which make it of particular value to me.”

He was speaking earnestly now, while he looked away from her through the window. He might have made a direct appeal on first entering the house, but now his thoughts were dancing ungovernably instead of marching along in the order he had planned, and an instant he trembled in the fear that his coming might be nothing more than utter uselessness—utter madness. Then a word came to save him—truth. He was there to speak the truth and make it clear, and he would forget everything else in the effort. That thought would be the shore-light by which he would swim. She listened in an attitude non-committal, neither encouraging nor discouraging, but she was intent and conscious of no sound save the soft retrospective voice of the man before her.

“I suppose,” he was saying, and his heart was talking now, “there are times when the gentlest natures must risk causing pain to a woman. While my purpose here is to buy

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the Twin Bar, there is something on another subject I would say to you."

"Perhaps I know," she said, softly, with pity that would have spared him.

"If you do, then I am hopeless; but there must be no doubt. You've seen an old house torn down—its foundations laid open, the cellars and groundways uncovered, the hearth-places where the family sat and whispered things not meant for the world—all bare and gaping up. No pretty windows or vines, or paint or red roof, but just the things they were meant to hide. That is what you will have to look at in me now. I'll hide nothing, for I can't, and—I reckon you'll believe me?"

She thought she said "Yes," but her lips moved silently. The hour deepened unnoticeably into twilight, and neither heard the muffled sounds of the city, the distant moan of the vehicles, or the cries of the boatmen on the river.

"I knew you would—I counted on that. But what you *think* is different. I suppose I ought to begin before I was born, but I won't take up your time that way. I have told you something about my mother, and

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how she was delicate and gentle, and little and pretty, with a head full of poetry and a heart full of love, and how my father was rough and brave, but gentle, too, or he could not have worshiped her and laid down his life for her, for that's what it came to in the end—though I'm not going to bother you with that. But I want to say that I didn't get any meanness from them, and if I've got any it just came by itself. But I did get notions and fancies, I reckon, that don't go well with bankin' and storekeepin' and cow-punchin,' and other things that folks have to spend a good deal of time at in this world. . . . Up to the time I was twenty I knew only one woman well enough to call friend, and that was my mother. At the schools I went to before she got too sick for me to leave her I never played with the girls, partly because I was shy and partly because I couldn't feel it was right for just an ordinary boy to be talkin' to angels. You see, I began by bein' a fool, and I didn't end up much better. My mother was always talkin' about beauty and truth and poetry and love, till I believed that was what the world was made of. She was a pure

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being of perfect light, and while she lived she filled the world for me. . . . I'm not tellin' you this to excuse myself in any way, but because it is so, and I want you to know from the beginning. When she died there was about enough left to keep me at college for the first year, and I worked out the others. It kept me pretty busy, because I had lots to make up. Most of what I knew didn't count there—it was such a different sort. Well, I wore so thin from so much study and want of sleep that the doctor finally said I'd have to clear out, so I started for the Pecos country. All this time I had no women friends, which is what I'm coming to. The Pecos boys called me 'green,' which I reckon I was, and not wishin' to appear unsociable or afraid to follow where they led, I began to ride over to the Sable Serpent."

She gave a little shudder, and slipped helplessly down in the chair by which she stood. He was still standing away from her, while he gazed steadily through the open window.

"As I've told you, when I was a boy I held aloof from women, thinkin' they were

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just noble creatures God had put in the world for men to wonder at. But one day I began to understand what my mother had been to my father, and to realize that some day one of those wonderful creatures would come into my life and be everything that my mother was, except that she would be young and could trip about and go everywhere with me. I then began to look at women with a distant, critic's eye, and to say that she must not be like this one or that one, but at last I left off wondering and trying to paint her to my soul, and was content just to believe that she would be the crown and glory of my life. Finally I didn't care to look at women any more, for I was waitin' for *her*. That was the way I felt when I began to go to the Sable Serpent. And there I met a woman—and this is what you may not understand, for I don't think I understand it myself. I knew she was not the one, but she was pretty as night when all the stars are on parade, and though she laughed and talked high with the others she was always sweet and gentle with me, and would touch my sleeve so lady-like and say she felt that I respected her, and that the worst woman in

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the world could save her soul if all men were like me. When she would say that, and look at me with the tears ready to start, and a sort of clutchin' at her throat, my head would swim and I would feel like takin' her in my arms and runnin' away where she would be safe. I told her that if she would leave the place I would protect her, but she said that couldn't be unless I married her, for the world would still think she wasn't respectable. But I'm not excusin' myself. Maybe it *was* her black hair and eyes and pink cheeks that had most to do with it. Maybe I was glad of a chance just then to give up the dream-woman for the real one. Months and years are very long to the young, especially when they're waitin' and waitin' for somethin' that don't come, and feel that they can't begin to live till it does come. . . . I married her, but I reckon you'll believe me when I say that she was never any more to me than the incarnation of a great folly."

He paused, as if the bitterness of his words made it impossible for him to speak, his eyes still fixed on the window instead of the motionless woman beside him.

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“ You—you—left her? ”

“ I would not put it in that way. When her nature was revealed to me we could not do other than part. But, as I said, I’m not excusin’ myself. When I was untrue to my ideal I was untrue to you, and the fact that I didn’t meet you till afterward don’t make the sin against you any less.”

She leaned forward so silently that he, not looking, did not know that she had moved. Her voice to him seemed dead and unvibrant. In reality it was weighed down by crushed and overmuch feeling.

“ You saw her—afterward? ”

“ For a moment—at a distance—the day she died.”

She leaned back with a sound like a moan, and said nothing, and he welcomed a little silence. When at last she spoke it was in a whisper:

“ She—is—dead! ”

He did not hear her.

“ I was beginning to get easy,” he went on, “ and accustomed to the ‘ ropes ’—when you came, and I knew I had to take my turn in the ring again. I had played the clown be-

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fore, but this time I was to ride wild horses. The night of the dance at Green Fork—the night we crossed the Upper Ford—I had to pull like Samson to keep out of the ditch. God! If I could have spoken *then* you would have heard a heart! . . . Yes, the wild horses were plungin' their maddest that night. . . . But I managed it. . . . I reckon you'll admit that I managed it."

Again he paused, the intensity of feeling produced by recollection leaving him voiceless, while the burning power of his passionate words made her heart stand still.

"The mere death of the woman," he resumed, in a voice so low as to have been indistinct to a listener less intent, "I know can mean nothing. It is what I have done that counts with women like you. . . . But though life without you is life without breath, though my world without you is a world without light, I shall try to do something besides wait for death. I have learned better than to make pictures out of a world where hearts beat, blood flows, and women weep. Doing is better than dying, and I'll try to get through in a way that won't shame the man you looked

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at once. Of course you do not know how I love you—and it's beyond my expression to tell you—or you would never ask why I want to buy the Twin Bar. It is for a stronger reason than cattle-raising. The one woman I love, and will always love, I met there, and since she is forever lost to me it would please me to own the place where she once lived and rode and laughed—where I even sometimes rode beside her and, smothering the ache in my heart, laughed with her while I told her stories of the mountains. There are so many paths there she loved to travel, so many spots she loved to frequent. . . . Juno's Cañon and Painted Mountain are there—the old Piney Trail crosses the place—the River Road touches it—*Catherine!*”

As he wheeled from the window there was no questioning the sob which shook the shrinking woman beside him. Her whole form was quivering with the emotion she sought vainly to suppress. Nor could there be any mistaking the deep joy-light in her swimming eyes as she half rose and swayed impulsively, helplessly toward him.

“ I—I—forgive you——”

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In an instant she was in his arms, and the gentle Lambkin was at peace.

.

The hour was late for a man on a business call, but he made no move to go. He preferred—and it suited her—to sit musingly by the window and watch the lights of the pleasure-boats on the river. There was quite a throng of them, for these were the closing days of the launching season.

“I believe you knew I loved you,” she said, in sudden accusation, and though it was good to have him ease his conscience, she could have choked him when he replied serenely:

“Of course. You don’t suppose I could have talked like that if I *hadn’t* known?”

Merrily upward to their window rose the nautical cries of the boatmen and the laughter and song of the pleasure-seekers. The launch of “Captain” Dick Thorne, gay with her many-colored deck-lights, presently came puffing down, her lively passengers filling the night with mirth.

“There’s a man on that launch I might have married,” she said.

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"Yes!" he mildly interjected. "He seems to be having a good time— That for you?"

The winding note of a horn had suddenly come up to them. Captain Thorne, when unaccompanied by his lady-love, in passing the house on the bluff never failed to stand prominently on deck and give a gallant salute, and he seemed to be especially vigorous this evening.

"Yes, it's his signal. I sometimes answer him with this."

She took from the wall beside her a pretty, gold-trimmed instrument, a present from Captain Thorne for this very purpose. Now, by all the gods, Lambkin, *you* are not going to blow it! But he did. He took it from her gently and blew a long, ecstatic note.

.

Some three weeks later a swarthy man with a vicious eye rode into the confines of the Twin Bar ranch, Val Verde County, Texas, and handed a letter to Mr. J. Jimsey, Foreman, whose gradual metamorphosis of expression as he read was but little more of a spectacle than the gleefully distorted fea-

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tures of the messenger. It required a little time for him to grasp all the missive said, and a little longer for him to gather the proper amount of faith, but when, after repeated scrutinizations of the bold, familiar hand, alternated with wondering glances at the enraptured Turtle, now filling the air with corroboration more graphic than elegant, the foreman realized that this was true, his behavior was like unto seven miracles, his chief desire seemingly being to defy gravity and rise and ride in the air like a balloon. Indeed, it was not until the Turtle took him violently in hand, and, stretching him prostrate, sat resolutely upon his person, that he became rational and coherent. For this is what he had read:

PERRY, OKLAHOMA, *November 20th.*

“MY DEAR JIMSEY: This will be handed you by Mr. Turtle Mose, who will undertake to enlighten you upon any details about which you may be curious, and which I have not the time to make clear at this writing. Having bought the Twin Bar, I wish to say that you will in future take your orders from me, though this may not be very agreeable

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news. If you will recall a recent moonlight incident in Clover Gulch, near Panther Ford, in which, owing to a very natural mistake, I was intolerably embarrassed, and which you lost no time in mentioning to every man and woman in Texas, you will understand that you have little to expect from me.

“As it will probably take all winter to satisfactorily dispose of my interests here, I shall not be down until the spring months, and meanwhile you will report to me fully once a week.

“Captain Kitty, who for nearly a week now has been Mrs. Jones, tells me that you are taking good care of Adjutant Snuffles, which, I am sure, does you much credit. I wish at your first opportunity you would move Bismarck and Terrapin over, also get my books and put them in the east room up-stairs. Tell Scotty that if he has dog-eared my Lorna Doone he can expect a whalin’ from me along about April.

“Tell all the boys we are coming.

“BUTTERNUT JONES.”

FINIS

(4)

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